

A SERVANT
OF THE
COMPANY
GEORGE SURREY



MILFORD

A SERVANT OF THE COMPANY



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HUMPHREY MILFORD



"I TOLD YOU—HALT!"

[See p. 117.]

A SERVANT OF THE COMPANY

BY

GEORGE S. SURREY

Author of "Mid Clash of Swords"

"A Northumbrian in Arms," etc.

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HUMPHREY MILFORD

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CHAPTER I

AT FORT SCOTT

In whatever part of the Dominion you may happen to find yourself, from Rampart House on the Alaskan boundary to Beaver Hall Hill in the city of Montreal, and you hear—as you inevitably will, and frequently at that—the words “the Company,” you’ll know that what is meant is the Hudson Bay Company.

There are, of course, other firms and companies carrying on the same kind of trade and operating in the same parts of the Dominion, but when men refer to these, they do so by specific names. There is only one “Company.”

Compared with the H. B. C., the oldest and most powerful of such rival concerns is nothing more than a mushroom in point of age and growth. The H. B. C. is *the* Company. It has been so since 1821, when occurred, after thirty-five years of fierce commercial conflict, more than once taking the form of lead, gunpowder, and cold steel, the amalgamation of the original corporation with its biggest rival, the North West Company.

A good and clear title has the H. B. C. to such distinction. It began operations in what is now the Dominion of Canada as far back as the reign of Charles the Second; and for more than half a century before it gave up some of its exclusive rights to the government in 1879, it was not only the virtual, but the actual,

governing body throughout the wide North West. Beyond the settlements it ruled absolutely.

It was responsible for the opening up of the land west of Manitoba. The Red men knew nothing of, and cared less for, the Government, but the H. B. C. they knew very well indeed, and respected its representatives. For the "big man" from the East who might occasionally come amongst them they cared not a straw; whatever authority he might possess at home was matter of complete indifference to the red warriors and hunters; but the H. B. C. trader or factor was a man whose power and influence were to be recognised, his good will sought and kept.

That tradition isn't dead to-day. It rested on a sound foundation, and is as alive in the soul of the North West Indian of this century as in that of his grandfather.

Tradition has its effect not on the Indian alone; its influence is felt likewise by the white servants of "*the* Company." In the days gone by, lads entered the service of the H. B. C. in their teens and stayed right on. They had no thoughts of early retirement. The life agreed with them—a healthy, full life; and the climate helped to the conserving of vigour of brain and body, keeping them in harness until long after the period when successful men in other occupations of commercial endeavour were satisfied they had worked sufficiently and were eager to settle down to an existence of ease and comfort. Not so the veterans of the H. B. C. The Com-

pany was their pride. They had contributed largely to its success, and they were not content to leave it. These men had the power and influence of tradition behind them, and they transmitted the same to those who worked under them and, in course of time, would come to succeed them. Behind every white man in the Company's service was the tradition of power and authority, of success, of government, and every man sought to make himself worthy to hand this on.

Never did a trading corporation of civilised days win and keep such loyalty in its servants as the Hudson Bay Company. Never was there monarch could claim truer and more faithful allegiance. Yet those who served did so under no smooth and easy conditions. Life in the far-off posts was hard, terribly hard sometimes. The money compensation would seem wholly inadequate according to the standards of cities of other lands. The Company required of its men that they should work—work hard and long, often under bitter and difficult conditions, and with little time or opportunity for pleasuring. There was no inducement of large gains and ample leisure wherein to enjoy them.

A rude and inadequate life might such appear to the outsider ; a dangerous life often, a monotonous one nearly always. But it was a man's life, with Romance cloaking its severity, and the Spirit of Adventure ever present to contradict the semblance of monotony.

And when was the day that Romance and

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Adventure have not offered an irresistible appeal to the men of British blood? And whenever has thought of their twin brother, Danger, intimidated men of that blood from answering to the call?

To the breed whose ears have never been deaf to that appeal belonged Donald Fraser, agent in charge of Fort Scott, H. B. C. post located beside the Lyard River in what has of late years become known as Mackenzie Territory. But if you had suggested to him that it was the whispering voice of Romance or the beckoning finger of Adventure had drawn him into this little-known corner of the vast North West, he would have looked at you with hard, blue Scots eyes glinting disapproval of so ridiculous a notion, and have told you he went there because the Chief Factor had sent him.

There he was, in a rich fur-producing district, and he had done well—"Well enough" he would have put it. He had forty-one years with the Company at the back of him; but in neither his rugged, brick-red face nor robust, square-built body was there a hint of such long service, or that the man was within easy distance of his sixtieth birthday.

He was a Highland Scot, and proud of his blood. They were English men, and it had been English money had founded the "Company of Adventurers of England, trading into Hudson's Bay," but chiefly to men of northern Britain had fallen the development and control of the actual trading. Scotsmen by the hundred have

entered the Company's service : shrewd, forceful men of hardy body and clear brain ; and in the Dominion they have found a country and an existence well suited to the full development of their racial characteristics. They have taken, and they have held fast. Clannish and jealous are they by nature ; and for a century and more it has become unusual to find a Company man holding important position who has not been of Scottish birth or descent.

One day in July, in the big, timber-built storehouse which made up the larger part of the buildings comprising Fort Scott, Donald Fraser and his assistant were mighty busy checking through and packing into place the extensive and varied collection of stores unloaded the previous day from two heavy barges that had come up river from the great Mackenzie. The six months supplies discharged, the barges had gone down again that morning ; and within ten minutes of saying " Good-bye," the trader had turned to work that chaos might be reduced to order and the storehouse made neat and orderly without loss of time.

And a motley collection of goods it was that Fraser, with lists and pencil, and Harry Revell, his assistant, with his strong, capable hands, had to deal with.

There were chests of tea, barrels of sugar, sacks of rice. Boxes of cartridges were piled on cases of black tobacco. Bales of the famous Hudson Bay blankets, heavy and white (your Indian—and he has little to learn in the matter

—won't buy a coloured blanket if he can avoid it), four point, three-and-a-half point, three point, rose in tiers, buttressed with great cases of canned fruits, canned butter, condensed milk, and candles. Breech-loading rifles, axes and hatchets, sheath knives and tools, were dumped alongside hundredweights of bacon and bales of calico. Garden seeds, tin pans, copper pots, barrels of flour, salt, bundles of shoe packs, packets of medicines and kitchen condiments were heaped together in apparently hopeless confusion.

With a leisurely haste the pair worked, wasting neither time nor effort, so that every article went into its appointed place direct. The trader took the bale, case, or package nearest at hand, found it on the written schedules he held, and named the number, quantity, or weight. Checking this carefully, Revell carried, heaved, or rolled the article to its proper location.

The assistant's job was no light one, and his appearance by no means suggested the physical ability to continue at it for any length of time without being overcome by fatigue. The H. B. C. had not abandoned its old-time practice of putting up goods in "pieces" weighing between ninety and a hundred pounds, this being the limit that experience had proved to be within the capacity of its voyageurs to portage (for several miles on occasions) when, by reason of rapids or other impediments of river travel, it was found necessary to unload the barges, or York boats, in order to continue.

Now to keep on lugging and heaving hundred

pound weights without rest or intermission is no weakling's job. That Harry Revell could keep on, without quickening or noisiness of breathing, or the smallest slackening of effort, was evidence enough that those fellows—more than a few—who, arguing by his slenderness and general want of robustness, considered him "easy goods" in the matter of physical qualities, had made a wrong calculation.

The sleeves of his blue flannel shirt, rolled high above the elbows, showed a pair of brown arms undoubtedly slim, matching the rest of his make-up. But it is mighty easy to attach too great importance to mere bulk—especially in a man. It is not your colossus that invariably possesses great muscular strength. More often than not, this is not in proportion to the bulk. Quality of muscle is better than quantity any time. And when a man's muscle is not in the right place, he is badly balanced, and a loser rather than the better off for the excess quantity.

Harry Revell's arms were not big, but the muscle was where it needed to be for most effective use. It was of the real quality, too, long and snaky, not bunching into hard, ugly knobs under contraction. His shoulders were sloping rather than square, and the breadth of them was not impressive. But there was a depth to his chest that told of more than ordinary lung power. Which counts high. He had the long, smallish leg of the born horseman, and his movements indicated the speedy, tireless runner. "More than average strength, certainly," a

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trained observer might have summed him up physically, "but built rather for speed and endurance than extraordinary muscular effort," he would have added.

"Tough as chilled steel and tamarac root" was the description an old-time Company's servant had once given of him. And the occasion that had called forth this opinion had certainly been of a kind to give the opinion genuine value.

For three hours Fraser and Revell had been sticking at their job without a word passing between them not relevant to the work in hand; and then a man stepped out of the hot, bright July sunshine into the comparative dimness of the odorous storehouse.

"There's a man come in an' says he wants you, Mr. Fraser," he said deferentially to the trader. "Come up th' river in a canoe fast 's he kin lick."

Fraser marked off on his list a case of dried prunes, watched carefully while Revell hoisted and shoved it into place, and turned to the man by the doorway.

"Who is it?"

"Archie McDonald."

"From Fort Selkirk?"

The half-breed nodded.

"All right. I'm coming," and the man went out.

Fraser placed lists and pencil in his pocket and faced his assistant.

"Take a spell, my son. Reckon I won't be long gone," and the trader went out briskly.

Harry strolled out of doors and, seeing the half-breed squatting down, pipe in mouth, and staring blankly ahead, went across.

"What is Archie wanting, John?" he asked.

"Can't tell!"

"Didn't he say?"

"Said he wanted Mr. Fraser," replied the half-breed, without removing his pipe, and still staring pertinaciously at nothing in particular.

"Oh well, I reckon it's nothing very important," persisted Harry, though without much hope of eliciting information.

"Maybe!"

The blend of Indian taciturnity and Scots caution made John McCraw a person not given to lengthy conversation at any time. What he had to say he said in as few words as possible; when he had nothing to say, he held his tongue most successfully. But Revell was feeling that his own tongue was in need of exercise, and was little inclined to leave his companion in peace. Sitting down on the thick, dry grass, he made a further effort to beguile McCraw into conversation.

"Archie say they're all well at Selkirk, John?" he asked.

"No!"

"Did he say then that anything is wrong?"

"No!"

"Didn't he say anything?"

"Yes—want speak Mr. Fraser."

"Is that all he said?"

"Yes!"

"And didn't you ask him anything?"

"No. No business Archie McDonald."

Revell looked at his companion with comic despair. This was an old game he was playing with McCraw, and, as always, he was getting the worst of it. His hope of succeeding one day in entrapping or irritating the old man into using one word more than was absolutely necessary had never gained even the smallest encouragement. Under the present half-mischievous cross-examination, McCraw had not shifted his steady gaze by a hair's breadth, nor had his face taken on a shade of expression.

"John, I give you up," the lad said at length. "Don't you ever *want* to talk, just by way of a change?"

"Talk when have anything to say," answered the half-breed, stolidly puffing at his horribly rank tobacco.

"Well then, find something to say to me," commanded Revell. "Relate some yarn—something you've done; an Indian story. Make it up as you go along, if you've got to the end of your stock. Come along, John; I've been hearing nothing for three hours but bacon and blankets, and prunes and rice, syrup and tea, and I'd like a change."

In spite of what Harry Revell had said, John McCraw could loosen his tongue on occasion. He had been in the North West the better part of half a century, and his memory was a storehouse of tales of adventure and strife, of Indian legends and stories, an encyclopædia which,

during the long evenings of the winter before, he had opened for Revell's benefit. Due to this Harry owned a knowledge, second-hand but valuable, of the country and the people, white and red, that many a man with ten times his practical experience of the North West lacked.

"Not tell lies. My tales all true," asserted McCraw, mildly stirred by the suggested exercise of his imagination.

And he forthwith began to tell the story of the Moose-That-Walks, one of two starving Indians who, at the beginning of one winter, their powder and shot exhausted so that they had been unable to take any game and were literally starving, had found their way to the Company's lonely post by the Rockies known as Hudson's Hope. But there had been no one to help them. The post was temporarily deserted, locked up.

Through a rent in the parchment window the starving men had gazed into the interior, seeing all those things they so cruelly lacked. There were barrels of powder and boxes of bullets, cases of tobacco and chests of tea, food to relieve their immediate necessities, and the wherewithal to enable them to procure meat during the coming months.

Long they had looked, and, at last, his companion had suggested they break their way in and take what they wanted ; but Moose-That-Walks would have none of it. Sorrowfully the pair turned away, and for two days, with nothing to feed their empty bellies, they had

followed the southward trail. And then necessity overcame the Indian's scruples.

Back on their trail they turned and, without having eaten, again came to the post. They entered; and from his pack Moose-That-Walks had taken thirty pelts. Four he placed upon the powder keg and four upon the box of bullets, taking such quantity from each as he believed a fair exchange for the skins. Of tobacco he took three skins worth, and of tea as much as equalled in value the two skins he left on the chest. Then he tied the rest of the pelts together with a thong, hung the bundle on a nail, and departed with his companion, making the door fast behind them.

More they might easily have taken—all they could carry away—tea, tobacco, and ammunition enough to have supplied them for a twelve-month, and none would have been the wiser; the taking would never have been brought home to them; but with such riches at their disposal these two destitute Indians were content with the satisfaction of their immediate needs. Such was the red man's conception of honesty and honour.

“And did the agent at Hudson's Hope ever find out who it was had helped himself to the goods, John?” asked Harry, when McCraw had ended his tale.

“In the winter, sometime, Moose-That-Walks went back,” replied the narrator. “Had he not left his bundle of pelts? He go in, take down bundle, and say ‘Mine.’ So the trader know.

But Moose-That-Walks he tell how sorry that he have broken cache ; and when he see that trader not angry, he is surprised. You know, to break cache very bad."

"I like that tale, John, better than any you have related," Revell declared emphatically.

And then, seeing Fraser coming from his house, the Fort Selkirk messenger behind him, he got up, ready to resume work. But instead of making for the storehouse, Fraser stopped, spoke to the messenger, who at once went off in the direction of the river, and beckoned to Harry.

"Hullo ! what's gone wrong ?" was in the lad's mind as he hurried towards the trader ; and the thought slipped into his mind of being sent on a journey, perhaps to Fort Selkirk. The idea appealed to him. The river would be delightful, and the two hundred and fifty mile trip form an agreeable holiday from the somewhat monotonous round of life at the post.

Or it might be he was going to be removed altogether. Perhaps Fraser's last report upon him hadn't been a satisfactory one. He liked Fraser—a jolly good chap, never unpleasant or out of temper, but one of those fellows of whose opinion of you it wasn't easy to feel certain ; absolutely just, but not a man who'd allow his feelings to sway him an inch away from what he considered his duty towards his employers or himself.

A glance at the trader's face told Revell nothing.

"I want to talk to you ; five minutes will

be sufficient," said Fraser in his customary direct manner; and he went back into the house, Harry following.

"You were sent here last August," he began abruptly, as soon as they were in the scantily furnished room he called his office.

"Yes; a year ago yesterday."

"And is it your belief you have a full acquaintance with the work of the post?" went on Fraser.

"I think, Mr. Fraser, there are still some details I have to learn," Harry answered.

"Humph! Then you're not confident you know fully as much of the job as myself—could do as well as I do or, maybe, better?"

"Sure I couldn't. I've been here one year—"

"And I've been agent here or elsewhere for fourteen," interrupted Fraser. "Well, ye're right; though I've seen assistants who believe otherwise, and after a no longer experience than ye've had. Ye're beginning to understand the Indians somewhat?"

"I hope so. I've tried."

"Trying's not enough, my lad. A man has to succeed before he's worth aught to the Company," said Fraser bluntly. "How old are ye?"

"I shall be eighteen this coming December."

Not unnaturally, Harry's curiosity as to what was coming was growing stronger.

"And ye had been in a Company's store back east for a year before coming to me; and six months on your brother's ranch in the Cypress

Hills before that, to see how you and the country agreed. Ye're English born ; and your father is in England and still alive. Is that correct ? "

" Yes."

Harry hadn't suspected such details were familiar to Fraser. Neither could he gather from Fraser's face or words whether this examination was a preliminary to being informed a recommendation was to be sent in that his services be dispensed with, or that his work at the post had been considered satisfactory.

" Ye see," went on the agent, " I like to know about the men who're sent to work with me ; for ye'll understand it isn't only just what a man *does* that makes him worth while. Ye've got to know more of him than just that which ye see to form a sound opinion. That's my way of thinking anyhow. Ye've worked well enough, Revell, whiles ye've been up here ; ye're sound in body ; ye've more than a suspicion that an Indian's not a wild beast or a savage, but more or less of a man (a better in some things, when he's a good Indian, than many a white I've had to do with) ; and the record behind ye's no so bad. I'm glad it is so. It's with an easy mind I'll be leaving here this day and ye in charge of the post until I come back, which'll be no more than a two-three weeks, I'm hoping."

" Leave me in charge ! " Harry repeated.

" Ye're the only assistant I have," Fraser returned quietly. " But I tell ye plainly, Harry Revell, that if I'd not been satisfied ye were

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capable, I'd have locked up the post an' taken ye along with me to Selkirk. An ill man would do the Company more harm than a closed post."

"Is there trouble, then, at Selkirk, Mr. Fraser?"

"Trouble enough! Mr. Grant, the Chief Trader there, lies ill. It seems he has had a bad accident; and he has sent for me to take his place until he mends, or another goes in his place, should he not. And so you get promotion, though but a temporary one."

"And for the good opinion which makes you think me worth even that, I'd like to thank you, Mr. Fraser," cried Harry impulsively.

"Ye may thank yourself, not forgetting your forbears, for that opinion. If it weren't deserved, my lad, ye'd not have it, I can assure ye," answered Fraser uncompromisingly. "It's no service to the Company to say a man is a good servant when ye know he's otherwise. And now I'll be going. Archie will have the canoe ready by now, I'm thinking. I'll wish ye well," and he held out his hand to take Revell's in a strong, close grip.

"Any directions to give, Mr. Fraser? Any instruction you think I may be needing while you are away?" asked Harry, as the two made their way down to the landing place, where the messenger and his canoe were waiting.

"No!" answered the agent, decisively. "There's no time for that, and anything that I might try to impress upon ye as important would only fluster and hamper ye. There's but

one fixed rule to remember : Do your best for the Company. How ye'll do that depends upon yourself, your own native wit, grit and gumption. I couldn't advise ye for all circumstances in five minutes—nor yet in five days. Ye'll have to find out for yourself as they occur. That's the test of a man's capability. If he's wanting someone at his elbow at all times to tell him what to do, or advise him what not to do, then he's not fit for responsibility, and the Company's no use for him. The Company before yourself. Ye needn't to be reminded of that."

Five minutes later, having waved his last farewell as the canoe slipped around a pine-clothed bend of the river, Harry Revell was walking thoughtfully back to the living-house of the fort.

His smooth, browned features were set and he was frowning. He was trying to realise that he was in charge ; that as the representative of the H. B. C. he was responsible for several thousands of pounds' worth of stores and the maintenance of the Company's position in the eyes of the inhabitants of the Indian village whose tepees clustered thickly half a mile distant. How he fared in respect of these would, in a large measure, be the proof of his fitness, or otherwise, for the trust Donald Fraser had placed in him.

CHAPTER II

THE GOLDSEEKERS

An "out" post of the Company, situated in a vast region where only the faintest trail of civilisation had yet appeared, though one that furnished an immense amount of trade in the form of furs, Fort Scott had nothing of the considerable appearance which distinguishes, for example, Fort Chippewyan on Lake Athabasca. Neither did it contain any of the structural developments, embracing sawn lumber, two-storied buildings, and balconies, such as the traveller down the Mackenzie is apt to notice to-day, developments that would cause a trader of the past generation, could he view them, to wonder if the Company's present forts are not rather hotels.

Four separate buildings made up Fort Scott, all constructed of logs with the ends roughly squared, and roofed with well-pegged shingles. These were disposed in a rough square, the dwelling-house in front and facing the river, a couple of hundred yards away. On the right was the big store; at the further corner, on the same side, a good-sized barn or shed. On the left, but nearer the house, a short range of low buildings which filled a variety of uses. But no fence connected the separate erections. The old-time stockade of upright heavy logs, closed by a ponderous gate, was absent. The time was long gone by when a H. B. C. post was

indeed a "fort," a refuge and defence against bands of blood-thirsty Red men.

Between the house and the river stood the ever-present flag-pole.

For three hundred and sixty-five days those buildings had not been outside Harry Revell's range of vision for more than a few hours at a time, but, coming back briskly from his plunge in the river the morning following Fraser's departure, Harry's grey eyes took in the familiar scene as if it were one fresh and novel that they beheld. The whitened walls, little enough amid the vastness of the open country, seemed bigger, infinitely more important, than they had ever before appeared to him.

The fancy pleased him, and he laughed to himself as he quickened his pace for breakfast. He was feeling proud of being the master and ruler of this little kingdom. And he was not ashamed of feeling proud.

When one is eighteen years of age, such pride is no drawback. It helps to the realisation of one's responsibilities.

His pride was in no way lessened when breakfast—fish fried in bacon fat, bacon, hot bannocks and tea—reminded him that this kingdom of which he was ruler furnished him with but a single subject—old John McCraw.

Breakfast over, he took the stores schedules and pencil and resumed the interrupted work in the storehouse, sticking solidly at it for a good five hours. A slow job, even with Fraser's help, he found it still slower and more tedious

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working unaided. McCraw was not to be taken into the work, the old man being unable to read anything more than his own name, and too feeble to lift the heavy packages.

Revell tired of it long before the summons to dinner, but he held himself down to it all the same. It was a job that had to be done anyway, and he promised himself little leisure until he was through with it.

This did not happen until ten days after Fraser's going, and more than once, during the scanty leisure Harry allowed himself, he caught himself wondering how wholly uneventful those ten days had been. Nothing had happened beyond the ordinary routine of everyday existence. Except for the loss of companionship, Fraser's absence had not made a jot of difference. Harry was sensible of an odd feeling of disappointment. For all the difference it had made to himself, except that he ate alone and had only the half-breed to speak to, Fraser might still have been at the post.

All this because there had been simply no occasion for use of that authority appertaining to the position Harry Revell had acquired. An Indian or two had sauntered up to the fort from the encampment to make an insignificant purchase, and it had been Harry who attended to him. But that had happened when Fraser had been on the spot. If the red men were aware of the trader's absence, they conveyed no acquaintance with the fact either by word or manner when they saw Harry. They were quiet and

civil in their demeanour, but if Harry had looked for an exhibition of greater deference than he was accustomed to from them, he was disappointed.

On the afternoon of the tenth day, the last item ticked off on the lists, the last package accounted for and put away in its proper place, Harry strolled down to the river for a few hours' recreative fishing.

Luck was with him, and within half-an-hour a dozen fine white fish were lying in the bottom of his canoe. His occupation was not so absorbing, however, that he failed to notice a boat as soon as it showed its nose around the bend behind which he had seen Fraser's canoe vanish. The Lyard, big river though it is, was a waterway along which the passage of any traffic was such a rarity that old McCraw always made a point of informing Fraser whenever any kind of boat, other than an Indian's fishing canoe, went by the fort. Weeks would sometimes elapse without the half-breed having a report to make. Thus Harry Revell, his interest at once awakened, suspended fishing and watched the craft, with a second following after a twenty yards interval, come steadily towards him. They were light scows, each with three men, two of whom were paddling.

"Hello!" shouted Harry, soon as the foremost paddler reached speaking distance, more than a little glad of this opportunity to prevent his tongue rusting.

"Hy-yah!" sang out the fellow in the boat,

but without checking the stroke of his paddle.

The two others in the scow looked at Harry, but said nothing, and the comment "Surly brutes!" was already in Revell's mind when the leading man evidently changed his intention.

"Ba-ack!" he abruptly yelled; and he and his partner checked the way of the scow.

The men in the second boat did the same by theirs, and Harry paddled across to them.

"This Fort Scott, buddy?" enquired the leading man in the free and easy style of the country.

"That's right," Revell replied.

"Reckoned we'd oughter make her somewhere about here, though there ain't much relyin' on these yer blame Indians' talk when it comes to distances," the man returned. "Mos'ly it figgers out they're either jes' plain liars or don't know nothin' at all—mebbe both."

"Accuracy isn't their strong point, sure," agreed Harry.

He was taking stock of the boats and their crews. Both scows showed various packages of the owners' belongings, and he did not overlook the muzzles of the three rifles in each boat. The six men were of the type and appearance that the country offers—brown, tough, sinewy fellows, each in coloured shirt and mole-skins, with a felt hat on his head more or less the worse for wear and exposure. Two were men of middle age apparently, bearded and commonplace-looking. The third in their boat was a youngster, very little older than Harry

himself, but half as big again, with the pale hair and blue eyes of the Scandinavian. Of the occupants of the leading boat one showed clearly Indian blood; the others Revell judged by their speech to be citizens of the United States—long-bodied, lean fellows, with bony, clean-shaved faces and quick, dark eyes.

"Much of a settlement araound here, bud?" asked the steersman of the first scow, after the mutual sizing up.

"Just the fort."

"So. H. B. C., eh?"

Harry nodded.

"First in always," and the speaker added one of the many current witticisms concerning the antiquity of the grip the Company had taken upon the country, raising a grin amongst his fellows.

"You do find us in most places," admitted Harry.

"Blame sight more frequent an' easy than we find other things," added the bow paddler. "Say, young feller, this yer store th' last evidence of yer outfit along this river?"

Revell told him it wasn't. Beyond, at the junction with the Dease River, there was another post.

"And how far'll that be?"

"About four hundred and fifty miles or thereabouts."

"Gee! but it's a blame long while between drinks up here," the man laughed. "And where d'you blow in, kid, when you feels yer

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wantin' some relief from th' all-fired racket and jollificationing of this show?"

"Well, the nearest place for the peace and quietness you're thinking of is Fort Selkirk," replied Harry, falling in with the fellow's humour. "You came through there?"

"Sure! 'Bout as rollickin' an' festive as a one-handed card play. Goin' back there when I feels th' time's come for peggin' out a cemetery claim. Ugh!"

"It's sure no wonder even th' trees grows moss on 'em," one of the middle-aged men agreed. "Now give me Seattle."

"And what are you up here for?" asked Harry, taking a hand in the game of questions. "Trappin'?"

The two Americans burst out laughing, the elderly men grinned, the Scandinavian lad sniggered.

"Trappin'!" echoed the bow paddler, who seemed to be the leader of the party. "Not on yer life, kid. All th' profit in that game is dealt at the wrong end for us. Ever heard of a trapper gettin' rich, eh? Only in yer dreams. No, sir; we ain't foolin' with no measly pelt proposition; c'n leave that to th' blame Indians, I reckon. We ain't tempted into this wilderness by th' hope of makin' a grubstake. Ain't th' news percolated into even this buried an' forgotten section that there's a place called Klondike been put on th' map?"

"Yes, we have heard of a big gold strike in the Yukon," said Harry.

"Waal, buddy, that place is goin' to stay put. Gold enough up there to last a few hundred years; long enough anyway for me an' my pards to get in an' rake off all we want. Mebbe when we're through an' wantin' something to occupy our attention we'll come back an' buy up this yer little old H. B. C. as a side line."

Harry laughed. "Good luck to you. But I thought everyone was getting into the country through Skaguay or Dyea," he said.

The leader winked. "Sure, them as wants t' spend all their fortune before they've made it," he answered. "Reckon we ain't such plumb fools. Dollar a pound for packin', that's th' Skaguay bill; by Indians at that. And before ye've gone half a mile th' price 's jumped to one twenty-five, an' th' packs dumped on the ground if ye so much as stops to think it over. Not for us, sonny. We've figured it out all right. From what th' maps say, where ye can't go by water in this blessed country ain't worth considerin'. Up this yer Lyard an' then strike th' Pelly River, an' we'll be in Dawson with our money in *our* pockets 'stead of th' pokes of them thievin' Indians."

"And you reckon to get there before the waterways freeze up?" queried Harry.

The leader picked up his paddle, suddenly, in a hurry.

"Not if we spend all day chewin' th' rag with ev'ry one we meet up with," he said. "So long, kid. Come, get a move on, you fellers."

"So long."

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The four paddles plunged into the water, and away went the two scows, with Harry looking after them and smiling. His reference to the unseasonable rapidity and severity with which winter descends upon the north-western land had not been relished by the confident goldseekers.

"Glad I'm not in their company," he told himself as he sent the canoe cutting towards the landing place.

But it was something more than apprehension of the hardships in all likelihood lying in wait for the adventurers that prompted this reflection. There was something about the appearance of the party, the two Americans in particular, which inspired him with a feeling approaching distrust.

The next day, while Harry was saddling his pony, intending to ride to the Indian village near-by, old John McCraw drew near.

"White men—six—make camp up along river," he said. "No good," and he wagged his head in decided disapprobation.

"Don't think we need worry ourselves, John," Harry replied cheerfully. "They'll soon be gone. I had a yarn with them on the river; and they said they're in a hurry to push ahead."

He little knew what a brief time ahead it was that he would be finding it necessary to revise that opinion.

CHAPTER III

TROUBLE IN THE MAKING

Harry Revell found a visitor awaiting him when he went down to the river for his early morning swim—an indulgence which the sharpness of the air, already carrying a hint of frost, though it was yet but the first week in August, warned him would not be of long continuance. A man was just stepping out of a canoe, and it was no agreeable surprise to recognise in him the bow paddler of the leading scow of two days before.

"Hello, buddy!" the man gave greeting.

And Harry replied "Hello!" neither feeling nor making show of any great cordiality.

"Boss araound yet, kid?" the fellow went on.

"He is," the lad answered curtly.

"Waal, jes' worry him aout, kid, an' tell him I come up here to see him. My name's Gardner—Jesse Gardner."

Harry looked the man up and down, his cheeks flushing. He was young enough to resent the familiar, almost contemptuous tone Mr. Jesse Gardner chose to adopt, but he had self-control enough to keep back the words that rose to his lips.

"The boss will be busy for ten minutes or so," he said. "There's his house"—pointing. "If you'll go and wait there, he'll see you inside ten minutes."

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And, without waiting, he hurried down to the water. Gardner looked after him, muttered viciously to himself, and strolled up to the house.

In less than the time specified, the interval spent in curious examination of the buildings, he was joined by Revell, glowing and tingling all over from his immersion.

"Well, and what is it I can do for you?" he asked.

The American swung round on his heels, scowled, and, in an ugly voice, said: "Do what I told you before, kid. Fetch th' boss of this shanty along. There's some truck I'm wantin'."

He allowed a couple of seconds to elapse; then, his hard, light-coloured eyes snapping angrily—for Harry hadn't moved—he snarled: "You get a move on yer quick, or——"

"Reckon you aren't aware you're making a trifling mistake, Mr. Gardner," interrupted Harry, but with much politeness. "What is this truck you're wanting? You asked to see the boss; well, he's here."

"Where?" the man snapped, glancing round quickly.

"Right here in front of you."

For a couple of moments the American stared angrily before the truth dawned. Then he realised the joke was on him, but it was clear he had no appreciation of it.

"You th' boss?"

"Sure!" said Harry, smiling; "only you

wouldn't give me the time to tell you. I'm in charge of this post. My name is Revell."

"Reckon an epidemic must 've struck the H. B. C. an' wiped out most of her men," Gardner muttered, but Harry affected not to hear this uncomplimentary insinuation. "Yeer th' feller we talked with yes'day, fishin'; why in thunder couldn't ye say then you was in charge here?" he demanded.

"Well, there didn't seem any need," Harry answered. "But it doesn't seem to me you've lost a lot for want of learning the fact earlier. Say you want to buy something? Are you in too great a hurry to wait until after breakfast? I see the cook pushing his head out of the kitchen door."

Hospitality, the asking of a visitor, no matter whether you have never before set eyes on him, to sit down to food or join in any meal going, is the rule in the North West, and the fact that Harry was not pre-possessed in Jesse Gardner's favour, and strongly resented the manner he chose to adopt, was no reason whatever for breaking the observance of that rule.

"Waal, that sure ain't a bad notion, mister, and I reckon it suits me all right," Gardner said, becoming more agreeable. "Do a pretty consid'ble trade araound here, hey?"

"The chief isn't complaining, I believe. Come along."

During the meal Gardner became still more pleasant, evidently laying himself out to be entertaining, and Harry found him an interesting

companion. He had had experiences and adventures, collected during a life spent in prospecting all over the American continent, the relation of which Harry listened to with absorbed attention. Stories of rich strikes, escapes from wild animals and Indians, fights with rival prospectors and robbers, tumbled out, one on the heels of the other, all told with a vividness and crispness interfering sadly with the satisfying of Revell's appetite.

"And naow at the end o' five an' twenty years of it, I'm without a dollar to my name beyond what's appearing in these yer scows down along," he concluded. "But it's a sure thing I'm on to this time; a cinch," and he winked expressively at his host. "Ridin' for th' millionaire stakes this time, you bet yer everlastin' boots, my son. Let my outfit get through to Dawson—an' we *will* get there all right, whatever stands in th' way—an' in two years they'll be talking of Jesse Gardner an' John Rockefeller in th' same breath. Yes, siree, it's make or bust this time. An' there's no bustin' for me, whoever else goes under," and he banged his fist heavily on the table in emphasis of his determination, to which his flashing eyes and squared jaw lent corroboration.

"Well, I wish you luck," said Harry.

Gardner laughed harshly. "Reckon I got luck so fixed up this time she can't escape," he returned, speaking less excitedly. "And Heaven help the feller, red or white, who tries to cut her loose while I'm alive an' able to

use a Winchester or six-shooter. Picked my outfit this time. That's lucky. There's Ed.—my brother—nigh as good a man as myself. An' that Indian 'd put his head in a fire if I told him. Learned it ain't safe to buck ag'in Jesse Gardner more'n once. Th' other fellows—you saw 'em in th' second scow—they're all right, even th' Swede. They do as they're told, too, an' don't ask no frivolous question. Been up against it, sonny, all my life—bad; but this time I wins out; and I wins high."

"Well, I reckon you'll deserve it, whatever you get," Harry said. "I've heard from some of the men who've been here what that Yukon country is like. Winter up there is no joke."

"Neither's Jesse Gardner when he gets goin', sonny," rejoined the American grimly. "An' now I'll take along them tins of jam I came up here for an' I'll get, or maybe th' Indian who's canoe I borrowed t' come up in 'll get foolin' araound our camp an' get hurt. Ed. don't like Indians no more 'n I do, an' he's plumb hasty."

"Eh!" Harry looked up. "You didn't take the canoe without saying anything about it?" he cried.

"What, ask leave of an Indian!" and Gardner burst out laughing. "I saw th' blamed thing lyin' araound an' I took it."

Harry shook his head. "Our Indians don't like their canoes meddled with," he said. "They're all right, decent chaps, but——"

"Young feller," Gardner broke in; "if you

knew 's much abaout Indians as me, 'n' I do know 'em—Pai-Utes in Idaho, Apaches in Arizona, Navahoes, Siwashes, an' a hull lot beside—you'd know that th' only good Indian is a dead Indian. An' I reckon yer Canyuck brand's abaout th' same. No, siree, Indians cut no ice with me."

"Treat them fair and square and they're all right," declared Harry, quite ready to speak up for the men he knew.

"Sure! and a square deal for an Indian 's a bullet," growled Gardner. "But abaout this yer jam, sonny."

The size of the store, the extent of the goods, impressed Gardner, and, while the jam was forthcoming, he looked about with interest.

"Say, boss, what in thunder d' yer do with all this lot?" he asked.

But when Harry explained that the goods weren't kept for show; that there were forty odd lodges of Indians to be supplied from the store with their means of existence during the coming six—maybe eight—months, the prospector snorted.

"Feedin' it t' Indians, pizenous Indians," he muttered.

"Where d' you think the Company 'd get its furs if it didn't take care of the men who obtain them?" retorted Harry. "That's my business. The Company finds the Indians in grub; the Indians pay for it in pelts."

"Feedin' Indians!" The disgust in Gardner's tone was eloquent of his feelings.

The sight of such store of food intended to be, as he seemed to consider, wasted, was too much for him, and with a "So long, mister," he hurriedly took his leave.

"Glad that man and myself aren't going to have any more to do with each other," thought Harry, as he watched him depart. "Reckon if we were together for long we'd find there are a mighty number of things we should disagree about. Hope the Indian, whoever it is owns that canoe, doesn't get to know of its being taken away."

Late in the afternoon, Harry Revell learned that his hope had been disappointed. John McCraw, his mouth for once full of words, came to him with the information that there had been trouble down at the goldseekers' camp. As ill luck would have it, Many Tails, the Indian owner of the canoe, had wanted it, intending an early morning fishing excursion—a most unusual occurrence. Not finding the canoe where it had been left, he had made enquiries among his own people, and then gone straight to the gold prospectors' camp. Possibly Many Tails had not been sufficiently deferential in his address to the white men—McCraw couldn't say—but one of the white men had got angry; and Many Tails had been informed that if he didn't quit talking and get instanter, he'd find an impetus given to his departure with a dose of lead. Whereat Many Tails had retreated, full of indignation, and fuller still of words when he reached his village. He and

his friends had got together and there had been angry talk.

This was unpleasant news, and Harry heard the half-breed's story with some misgiving as to the possible outcome of the incident. So far as himself was concerned, one of the most disastrous of all possible happenings was trouble with the tribe of Indians which, for several years past, had made its summer camp adjacent to the fort. With them was carried on the great bulk of the trade of the post. From the trader the red men obtained the stores which enabled them to carry on existence over the long winter months, bartering for food and ammunition the skins won by the summer hunting and the furs resulting from the winter trapping.

Well treated as they had been, diplomatically handled, there was no reason why the arrangement should not long continue. But Revell's experience had taught him that the red man is a creature full of moods and odd caprices; that he has a very keen sense of unjust treatment, and is inclined to create mountains out of the smallest mole-hills. He will chew over a grievance—and sometimes this may be more fancy than fact—until its importance becomes magnified out of all proportion.

In the Indian's make-up, too, there is much of the child, and he is prone to that kind of absurd resentment expressed in the old saying about cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. Trivial as was the incident of Many Tails' canoe, there was nothing wild or improbable in the

apprehension of the whole tribe, in sympathy with the aggrieved brave, taking it into their heads to forsake the fort. And if they did go away, it meant no furs would be brought in for trading. And if the trade of the post thus summarily vanished, there was only one person whom the Company would hold responsible—Harry Revell.

Directly responsible for the loss he would not be; but his superiors would most certainly hold it as proof of his inefficiency that he had been unable to prevent such a disagreeable development.

Greatly did Harry regret that the Klondike party had made its halt near the fort, and most sincerely did he trust that the resumption of its journey would be no longer delayed.

In the meantime, he thought it well to go down to the Indian village, and made up his mind to do so before the day was out.

Unfortunately for Harry Revell, developments were taking place more quickly than one might reasonably have expected.

Within five minutes of the narration of McCraw's story, Harry's ears caught the sound of a rifle-shot across the meadows between the fort and where the goldseekers had made their camp. A second followed immediately after, and, with quick apprehension of further trouble, Harry caught and saddled his pony, and, at a sharp pace, rode for the Indian village.

The forty odd tepees making up the encampment straggled over more than a quarter of a

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mile, and round and about these was no evidence of excitement. A dozen squaws were dotted about, engaged in some domestic employment ; a score or more of all but naked children were lying asleep or playing in the sedate, purposeful manner of their kind. But between the farthest of the lodges and the river Harry saw a knot of young men gathered, their gaze intently fixed in the direction where, he judged, was the white men's camp. None so much as gave him a glance as he hurried past.

Another minute, and Harry Revell was seeing and hearing sufficient to make him glad indeed he had not delayed in his investigation. Six feet from the muzzle of a Winchester that was pointed straight at his broad chest stood a tall Indian whom Harry recognised as Many Tails. At the other end of the rifle was a lean, hawk-nosed man with features sufficiently resembling those of Jesse Gardner to leave no doubt of the relationship.

Lounging near a ramshackle tent erected on the river bank were two more white men, their expression that of coarse amusement ; while a third, the flaxen-headed young giant, was tending a pot hung over a small fire.

So much Revell took in at a glance, and, checking his pony, he was opening his lips to demand an explanation of what was going on, when he heard the man with the Winchester call loudly " Three ! "

Immediately upon the word followed the sharp " Crack ! " of the rifle as the American



HE GRIPPED THE BASTARD BY THE NOSE, AND MOGGED IT FROM
ITS OWNER'S GRASP."

pressed the trigger, and it was a cry of horror that burst from Harry. But as the fellow had fired, he had thrown the muzzle upward and sideways, so that the bullet merely passed alongside the Indian's head.

"Ye son-of-a-gun! that'll learn ye not t' try bein' sassy wi' me. Nex' ———."

He broke off suddenly, stumbling back hurriedly to avoid being knocked down by Harry's pony, which, obeying the touch of the rein, had moved forwards, swerving sideways, so as to bring the rider directly between Gardner and the Indian.

"What d'you think you're doing? Lower that rifle at once," cried Harry sharply.

"Wha—at! An' who in thunder are you?" retorted the surprised American. And then passion overwhelmed his astonishment at this unlooked-for intervention. "You—you son-of-a-gun!" he spluttered, "I'll—I'll——."

And up went the Winchester again, as though the fellow intended shooting. But Harry was taking no chances either way. A touch sent his pony forward, and, stretching out his hand, he gripped the barrel of the rifle and, with a smart turn of the wrist, whipped it from its owner's grasp.

"When you're fit to be trusted with it again I'll return it to you," said the lad in a steady voice, though to tell the truth, he was trembling all over with angry excitement. "Now then; what's the meaning of what was going on when I came up?"

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For five seconds Ed. Gardner stared at his questioner in blank wonderment. Then, lips working and eyes flashing, he made a step forward as though to attack; but, evidently realising the situation—his own defencelessness, he stopped abruptly.

"You there, Simmins an' Martin, keep an eye on that red varmint; I ain't done with him yet," he called to those behind, without turning his head. Then to Harry: "An' who're you?" he demanded. "Who're you come buttin' in t' suthin' that don't concern ye?"

"You're Gardner, I suppose," returned Revell coolly; "and you're wrong. It concerns me a whole lot when I see a man intending murder. As to who I am, my name's Revell, and I'm in charge of Fort Scott."

"You are, are you?" said Gardner, his eyes measuring the other up and down. "You're th' trader at Fort Scott, an' you reckon that—Here," he broke off suddenly. "Here, quit this fool play an' hand back that rifle."

"When you're fit to be trusted with it again, as I told you before," Harry rejoined. "In the meantime—What is the meaning of your shooting at this Indian?"

Gardner glared savagely, then turned to glance at those behind as if to see whether they meant backing him up, but not one of the three had made a movement. Suddenly, facing Revell again, he broke into a harsh laugh.

"An' because yer th' H. B. C. feller ye allows yer th' Big Voice araound here, I s'pose," he said. "Waal, I was shootin' at this yer pet redskin o' yours, allowin' that I'd learn him a lesson so's he won't come to harm th' nex' time he talks to a white man. Meanin' him good, ye see. A blame dog comes rootin' araound th' camp, stealin' our grub, an' I jes' nachully drops a bullet into his thievin' carcase. Up comes this yer red son-of-a-gun, says as how th' dog is his, an' he wants payin' for it."

"Many Tails, stand where I can see you," Revell said quietly; and the Indian obeyed. "Now," continued Harry, still using the Cree tongue, "you have heard what this white man has said: Is it true?"

"It is true," replied the Indian.

"Then the fault is yours that the dog is dead. If you had prevented it from stealing the white man's food, the white man would not have shot it. Go now back to your village, Many Tails, and, while these men are here, seek not to anger them."

"And my canoe that the white man took," the Indian began.

But Harry quickly cut him short. "In that the white man was wrong. You shall be compensated," he promised. Then he faced Gardner again.

"See here, Gardner, there's no need for us to get mad and quarrel over something so trivial as this," he said frankly, holding out

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the Winchester for the other to take. "You were right in shooting the thieving dog, and if the Indian hadn't been feeling bad against your outfit on account of the canoe (and that, too, was only a little matter, anyway) he wouldn't have taken notice of it. First time I've known an Indian put any value on one of his curs. I'll have a word with the chief as I go back, so I hope you'll have no further trouble with the Indians. But it's well to recollect that this country isn't the United States ; in Canada we do things a bit differently. Taking the law into one's own hands isn't encouraged up here."

What Revell said was quite reasonable and his manner was frankly conciliatory, and if Ed. Gardner did not relish the warning reminder contained in the last words, he seemed to think it best to accept the olive branch held out.

"All right, boss, we'll let it go at that," he replied, with the appearance of good humour. "No harm done anyways. And if these yer Indians should get fresh an' a wallop's necessary to restore 'em to a right frame of mind, why I'll stroll up to yer fort an' ask yer permission before givin' 'em a licking. Ha, ha !"

"That's right," and Harry laughed also. "So long !"

He could see the man was laughing at him—which is not easy to bear when one is young and in a position of authority—but held his resentment under control. Certainly, he had no wish to quarrel with the party. At the

same time it was up to him to prevent serious trouble developing between the white men and his Indians, and to protect the latter against ill-treatment.

On his way back to the post, he stayed over in the Indian village for half an hour, having a talk with Big Elk, the chief, to whom he put it very strongly that every precaution was to be taken to prevent any of the younger bucks from interference with the Klondikers or their belongings.

"My father," replied Big Elk, when he had finished; "it shall be as you say. I am satisfied. I know that you wish us well and will protect us if injury should be done to us. My young men shall be warned. The spirit of my grandfather is aware how kindly the Great Company has treated the Indian, and I will be careful that such kindness is not forfeited. Have no fear. All is well. My young men shall not forget."

Harry rode back devoutly hoping they would not forget. But he told John McCraw to keep his eyes and ears well open when outside the fort.

CHAPTER IV

THE TROUBLE DEVELOPS

The next morning, about an hour after breakfast, Harry, from the store, where he was searching for a hank of fishing line, saw through the open doorway a man coming across the meadows towards the fort. Gifted with remarkably long sight, he was able to identify the man as Jesse Gardner, though more than a hundred yards distant.

"Coming to blow off steam about yesterday's little affair," he said to himself.

But he promised that, whatever the gold-seeker's intentions, he didn't mean, in the expressive western phraseology, "taking water." What he had done in defence of Many Tails he would do again—and more, if the occasion required. Contrary to his expectation, however, Gardner was wearing an expression of geniality instead of a scowl, and he greeted Revell with a cheery "Hello!" instead of an outburst of bad language.

"Waal, boss, come t' look you up again," he said. "Wantin' an auger this time. Got one on hand? That butter-fingered galoot, Simmins, dropped ours over into eight feet o' water this mornin' while we was unloadin'."

"Reckon we can fix you up all right," returned Harry. "Unloading the scows, you say! Anything gone wrong?"

"Waal, I wouldn't be sayin' it's just what was wanted," Gardner answered. "Woke up this mornin' an' found fifteen inches of water in one o' the scows."

"Awkward. Means delay, and you wanted to avoid that."

"Sure! A plank all rotten. Put yer knife clean through it. Say, kinder enjoyin' yerself down at our camp yes'day, eh?"

"Well, I don't know about enjoying myself," said Harry, looking up from a tool case, auger in hand.

"Ed. wasn't sure," and Gardner burst into a loud guffaw. "Why, boss, d'you know you'd got Ed. skeered all to pieces! What d'ye do to him, eh?"

"Nothing much. Thought he wasn't aware the Winchester was loaded; and as I wasn't looking for any accident of that kind, I took it away from him."

"Waal, you blame near skeered poor Ed. to death. Thought he was goin' to throw a fit when I come back to camp. Wish I'd been there t' see it. Ha, ha, ha!" and again Jesse Gardner broke into laughter.

But Harry did not join in his amusement. The laugh did not ring quite true, he thought. He watched Gardner cautiously, believing he was acting a part.

"Nex' time, boss, you feels like skeerin' Ed." went on the American, still amused, "don't leave me outer it. I'd like a whole lot to see th' fun. That th' auger? Looks th'

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goods. Have to put in a fresh plank. Ed. and Simmins are sawin' it out naow. What's th' damage? "

Gardner paid over the money, and with a "So long!" started for the door. But at the entrance he stopped and turned his head.

"Say, boss? "

"Well? "

"Why I was goin' to say that *if—if*, mind—we should happen on one of yer pet Indians pokin' araound at our other scow—testin' it with his knife, mebbe, t' make sure there ain't a rotten plank in her—if we catches him *an'* remonstrates, you won't think we're actin' mean or unfriendly. So long, boss."

And away he went before Harry could find a rejoinder, laughing heartily, as though his parting words were a big joke.

"Now what on earth did he mean by that? " Harry asked himself.

His conclusion was that Gardner's words very clumsily concealed a threat. And it worried him. Not that he felt in any way apprehensive concerning his own safety—that idea did not occur to him; but he did fear the development of ill-feeling between the Klondike party and the Indians into really serious trouble. What would be the end of that was not easily to be foreseen. It was for him to do his utmost to prevent it happening. The goldseekers were few in number, but they were white men—not the best class of white men, Harry feared—and Jesse Gardner had already made fully

evident the estimation in which he held Indians in general.

And if the white men did resort to violence, the Indians were not of the kind to take it patiently. This tribe that had attached itself to Fort Scott was neither of the pacific Beavers nor the physically degenerate and submissive Slavis; they were of Cree blood, of a race of fighting men whose war-like instincts had been developed and trained by age-long feud with their hereditary foes, the Blackfeet; and if these instincts had perforce been repressed since the coming of the North West Mounted Police and the formal establishment of the white men's law and government, they were by no means extinct.

The lodges might not be very numerous, but Big Elk was a chief who held himself important, and neither he nor his "bucks" was of the kind to submit tamely to wanton aggression.

To Harry Revell it was clear that whatever influence he could exert must, of necessity, be of the moral order. Force, except that of his own hand, he had none to employ. The nearest police post was more than four hundred miles distant.

"Confound Gardner and Co." he said heartily, after ten minutes' thinking over the situation. "Reckon I'll go down and have another quiet talk with Big Elk."

But not caring to leave the post deserted, he had to postpone the trip until old John McCraw showed up, and the western sky was beginning to glow red before he caught and

saddled his pony. He was feeling not at all satisfied. Maybe it was due to his sense of the responsible position in which he had been placed, but he suspected trouble ahead. He did not need telling that the person who sets out to meet trouble half-way is not acting wisely ; and he was not so nervous that he was going to see trouble where none existed ; but he had once seen a prairie fire, and the experience had impressed him. A lighted match carelessly flung aside after lighting a cigarette, had resulted in the laying waste of twenty-three miles of country. He was not the culprit, but the lesson had not been lost on him. "Don't let the fire get started." That is what he meant doing—if he could.

Less than half a mile from the fort he heard a sound that stopped him dead in his tracks. Now the Red man is not given to the making of unnecessary noises. He doesn't shout or sing when working or taking a walk. When he does indulge in any undue noise, such is sure evidence that he is labouring under some unusual excitement. And here, unless Revell's ears led him astray, were at least four Indians making the evening hideous.

He looked around but could see nothing. Moving about for a few minutes, he detected a thin, hardly discernible spiral of smoke ascending from a small clump of timber. Taking care to make no noise, he rode for the clump, and, on the farther side, came upon a fire about which were seated five Indians.

A single sniff, and Harry was aware of the origin of the noise.

At sight of him the Red men ceased abruptly, regarding him with portentous gravity.

The silence was broken by one of the Indians suddenly laughing.

"How!" he exclaimed, and held one arm aloft.

In his hand was a bottle.

"Where from?" demanded Revell, sharply.

But he knew without asking from where the whisky had come. It could be from but one place. That it had not been stolen from the fort he was fully assured; that McCraw had not given it to the Indians was equally certain. It had come from the Klondike party.

But how? Stolen or given?

"How!" repeated the Indian majestically.

And that was the only answer Harry could obtain from him or his fellows.

Now in the North West it is a crime to trade or give whisky to the Indians.

Swinging the pony about, Harry made for the camp by the river. He was thoroughly angry, and he was determined to learn the truth.

The glowing flames of a roaring fire (in the Mackenzie Territory early August sees the beginning of night frosts) guided him, and within five minutes he had reined in the pony, dismounted, and was striding to where the half-dozen goldseekers were lying around the fire silently smoking. Jesse Gardner looked up and recognised him.

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"Hello, pardner; what's th' rush?" he called out. "Set yourself down."

But the invitation was ignored. Harry went straight to the point without any beating about the bush.

"Back yonder I came upon five Indians," he said. "They had whisky with them. They were intoxicated."

"You don't say," said Gardner politely. "We heard no end of a row somewheres; reckon that accounts for it, eh?"

He seemed only mildly interested. The others, with the exception of the half-breed, who was staring vacantly at the glowing logs, were eyeing Revell with stolid indifference.

"It does account for it," returned Harry. "And I'm wanting to know where they obtained the whisky."

"Search me," the leader answered.

"You didn't give it to them?"

"Hey, what's that?" Jesse Gardner sat up quickly, blank amazement depicted in his face. "Give it 'em!" he repeated.

"Yes. Did you or did you not give them the whisky?"

Gardner looked open-eyed at his questioner, as though doubting he had heard aright. Then he transferred his blank stare to his brother, sitting on his right.

"Hear that, Ed?" he asked weakly. "Give—whisky—to—those—Indians! Did we?"

Ed. Gardner chuckled as though asked to enjoy a rich joke. "Waal, I should smile," he said thickly.

His brother looked back to Harry.

"Say, boss," he drawled, his manner that of a much injured person; "is this a comic vaudeville act or what? That's th' most blame funny question I've had put me yet since I come up to this country."

"Will you please answer my question," returned Harry, finding it difficult to keep his temper, for he was assured the man was laughing at him. "Did you give—or sell—whisky to the Indians?"

"Boss, you seems serious, so I takes you serious," Gardner replied. "You can bet yer last bottom dollar Jesse Gardner nor none in this yer outfit wastes whisky givin' it to Indians. We're goldseekers, we are, not traders; 'n' we ain't here 'tendin' to no Indians, but stric'ly to our own business. When I tails onto an outfit that makes presents to these yer red——"

"Then have you lost any whisky? Have your stores been meddled with?" interrupted Harry, taking up the only alternative—accepting Gardner's statement as true—explaining the condition of the Indians he had seen.

"I reckon not," said Gardner decidedly. "Sure, we unloaded both th' scows—allowed we'd do no harm makin' sure th' second one was O.K.—an' th' stuff's all piled up araound; but we ain't seen no red varmints prospectin' araound. Still, if it'll ease yer mind any, boss, we'll make certain. Ed., jes' take a squint under them tarpaulins."

With no good grace, Ed. Gardner hauled

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himself to his feet and slouched off to one of the great canvas-covered piles dotting the bank of the river.

"This yer delay we're makin' is plumb exasperatin'," his brother remarked, while the examination was being made. "Figgered it aout, I had, we'd be mighty near th' end of this yer river by naow. Still, I reckon we'll be on time. It don't do—Hello!"

He broke off quickly, answering a shout from his brother, who came hurrying back to the fire.

"What's bitin' ye, Ed?"

Ed. Gardner glanced first at his brother and then at Harry.

"We're two bottles o' whisky short," he announced.

"Th' deuce you say!" exploded Gardner violently, and leaped to his feet. "Where you been lookin'?"

"Only place where it was put," replied his brother. "Th' three demijohns was put together with that other truck," and he pointed. "Handled 'em myself. No, I ain't miscounted. Go, look for yerself."

He dropped down in his place by the fire, from where the rest had not stirred. Harry Revell went after Jesse Gardner, who had gone to look through the pile of stores himself. And as he moved away, Harry could have sworn he heard behind him a low chuckle of amusement.

"Ed.'s right," exclaimed Gardner as Harry joined him. "Only one jar's left." He

straightened up, looking Harry squarely in the face. "What 'd I tell ye about Indians?" he demanded. "They ain't one of th' varmin to be trusted. An' where d' we come in over this loss, eh? Two outer our three jars gone."

"I'll go up and see the chief," said Harry slowly, "and if your goods have been stolen—"

"Hey?" interrupted Gardner loudly.

"If your goods have been stolen," repeated Harry, in a steady voice, giving him back look for look, "I'll see to it that the thieves are punished."

"That don't give me back my lost jars," Gardner growled.

But Harry refused further argument. Without delay he left the camp.

Big Elk was sitting alone in his lodge when Harry Revell pushed the flap aside and stepped in. He was a tall man, a bigly made man, well advanced into middle age, stately and dignified of appearance, in spite of the deteriorating effect that the wearing of European clothes has upon the Indian. With his pipe he indicated to the visitor to take a seat on the other side of the little smouldering fire.

"Chief," began Harry abruptly, after a few seconds, speaking in the Indian's own tongue, "some of your men have been to-day at the camp of the white men by the river."

Big Elk made a gesture of acquiescence.

"To-night, the white men tell me some of their stores have gone."

"What is my brother's meaning?" asked

the chief, after half a dozen slow puffs at his pipe, his face expressionless.

"And five of Big Elk's young men are seated at a fire far from the village, drinking whisky," went on Harry.

"Does my brother say that the young men have stolen the whisky from the camp of the white men by the river?" asked Big Elk.

"It is that I wish to learn."

"And what say the white men by the river?"

"That two of three jars of whisky that they had have disappeared."

With blank eyes Big Elk continued stolidly to smoke, staring across the lodge until Harry grew impatient.

"What says Big Elk?"

"To-morrow I will ask of my young men," replied the chief.

"But it is to-night I wish to know the truth," persisted Harry. "I have seen the young men who are drunk," and Harry gave their names.

For the first time Big Elk's eyes were directed to those of the white man; but it was only for an instant, and a minute passed before he spoke.

"To-day, my brother, the five young men whose names you speak were at work in the camp of the white men," he said slowly.

"H'm!"

"Has my brother known Big Elk to speak that which is not true?" continued the chief. "Is his mouth ever full of lies, so that my brother fears to believe what he says?"

"No! It is known that Big Elk does not lie."

"Good! And now let my brother listen. He is young; and the young are ever willing to believe in a hurry, but my brother is not like that. He will believe my words. This morning, before the mist was off the water, the big white man, he whose eyes look at each other (this was meant for Jesse Gardner, who was slightly cross-eyed), came among our lodges, asking for our young men to help unload his two boats. He was in a great hurry, he said, and the packs were heavy. The boats needed mending. And some of my young men, White Buck, Chicken-with-many-Feathers, and others, the five whom my brother has named, said they would go. They would be well paid. I did not say Nay, my brother. Why should I? If my young men may earn money, and without doing harm, who am I to prevent them? Moreover, the money would be spent at the fort. So they went."

"And were paid for their work in whisky," cried Harry.

"I do not know," replied the chief.

"But you will find out."

The chief nodded. "To-morrow. To-night, should I ask of them, what shall I hear?" he asked sadly. "It would be the whisky speaking, not White Buck. To-morrow I will learn if the white man paid for his work in money or in the fire-water that is the Indian's enemy. And my young men will answer me the truth. Then will I let my brother know. Is it well?"

And Harry said it was, took Big Elk's hand in his, and wished him good-night.

The next day Big Elk himself came to the fort. He had questioned the five young men, separately, and all had told the same story. None had any money; none had received any money from Gardner. At the end of their day's work, they had been given a bottle of whisky among the five and told to clear out. They had asked for the money promised them, and had been told the whisky was in place of money, and if they didn't like it they could leave it; they would get nothing further. So White Buck and his friends had made the best of a bad bargain and taken the bottle of spirits—with most unsatisfactory results, for all were then feeling very ill. He, Big Elk, would see to it that the incident was not repeated.

The chief returned to the village, and Harry, angry indeed, sat down to think things over. He believed Big Elk's tale without reservation; he could understand Gardner's attempt to throw dust in his eyes; but he was at a loss to understand the rascal's reason for parting with the whisky to a red man on any consideration whatsoever. It worried him.

That the man must have known he was acting contrary to the law Harry did not doubt. Doubtless Gardner was quite satisfied that enforcement of the law against him was out of the question in this lonely quarter of the Territory. That he, Harry, was wholly powerless in the matter needed no emphasising.

Single-handed, against half a dozen men, he could do nothing. And his power with the Indians was limited to the influence he could exert over their chief. Nor was he forgetting that the authority of a chief over his tribe is anything but that of an autocratic ruler.

Once again Harry Revell asked himself the question: "What would Fraser do if he were here?"

So far as he could see, there was no more to do than he had already done, and would go on doing—keeping very wideawake; trying to keep the Indians aloof from the Klondikers; and wishing the latter the speediest of removals.

Of one thing he felt morally certain—the trouble Gardner had started was not nearly ended.

Of Big Elk's sincerity and assurance he had no doubts; the chief would certainly do his best to keep the Indians in hand. But to prevent a Red man from a further indulgence in intoxicating spirit is a hard proposition, a harder, so Harry feared, than Big Elk might be able to see through, however good his intentions.

McCraw's call that dinner was ready came as a welcome interruption.

CHAPTER V

AN AFTERNOON'S FISHING

For a wonder, McCraw was in a communicative mood. He actually initiated a conversation.

"Indians heap angry in village," he volunteered, placing a dish of smoking potatoes, raised by himself in the fort garden patch, alongside another in which sizzled whitefish fried in bacon fat.

"What's the trouble now, John?" asked Harry, giving himself a liberal helping from both dishes.

Luckily worry wasn't affecting his appetite.

The half-breed delayed his answer until he came back from the kitchen with a pot of strong coffee.

"Squaw come up," he went on. "Want needles. Say Indians talk lot because man come up from river and say Indians stole whisky. Says if they lay finger on anything more, he shoot without warning."

"Was that while the chief was up here this morning, John?"

"Mebbe. Indians say him liar, touch nothing. If he shoot, they kill him for sure. He say if he find man who stole whisky, shoot him on sight. Fellow come here an' buy jam. No good," and the old man shook his head in emphasis of Jesse Gardner's worthlessness.

"You're right there, John," Revell agreed.

"And see here, John ; if Gardner or any of his outfit comes around here while I'm away, keep a sharp eye on him ; don't let him inside anywhere. I don't trust them any farther than I see them."

"No good," repeated McCraw. "Don't trust at all."

The fish disappeared, and Harry fell to work upon a tender moose steak, and this approaching dissolution, McCraw brought in a dish of wild berries.

"Squaw say Indians get too much whisky begin fight," he said abruptly, as he set it down. "Chicken-with-many-Feathers get cut arm, another break his arm. If I do what I like to do, I shoot ev'ry blame one of that camp by river. No good," and the old man retreated to his dish-washing with a vigorous head-shaking.

It was a sure and effective check upon the trouble that was brewing the half-breed had suggested, thought Harry, concerned with this fresh development, but it could not be employed. What was going to be the end of the trouble ?

It seemed clear enough that Gardner and his outfit were working hard to annoy the Indians, to irritate them into some hostile action that would procure cause for retaliation. But why ?

The question Harry was quite unable to answer. Puzzle his brains as he would, he could dig out no satisfactory reason for such

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desire upon the part of men whose only anxiety, they alleged, was to get through the country without delay. Yet Gardner—or one of the outfit—had forced whisky upon the Indians (Harry fully believed that), denied it, alleging theft instead, and then gone out of his way to create a situation from which he might extract some justification for inflicting injury.

Again, Jesse Gardner had insinuated that the damage to the scow was the work of the Red men, had suggested the likelihood of an attempt to wreck the second boat. Why again?

An angry Indian's retaliation for the shooting of his dog? For the pretended shooting of himself? Not for a moment would Harry Revell consider so absurd a suggestion, much as he knew of the Red man's fondness for making a cause of enmity out of trifles.

No; he felt certain that Jesse Gardner was playing a deeper game. The man might be a rogue, but certainly he was neither a fool nor a madman.

Was the outfit what it pretended to be? The story of the Klondike journey only a bluff covering some more nefarious undertaking? Sure, it might be; but if so, what was it? And still again, why?

Not for the fun of the thing would the party do its level best to stir up trouble with an Indian tribe.

Was the explanation hostility against the Company?—the fort?—himself? The notion was too improbable.

Was Gardner but a jealous trapper, who hoped to drive the Indians from the neighbourhood of the fort that he and his outfit might profit in pelts thereby?

But that explanation also Harry turned down.

An hour's hard thinking failed to worry out a plausible explanation, and Harry dismissed the matter from his mind—so far as he was able. He did what many an older and wiser man has done when puzzled by a problem to which no solution is forthcoming. He took his rod and went fishing.

But it was not on account of the fish that he slipped into his hip pocket a small, but powerful, pair of field glasses belonging to Fraser. And maybe it was not altogether by chance that, instead of proceeding to his usual fishing station, he should turn the nose of the canoe up-river.

For a couple of miles above the post the river ran through a rolling, park-like meadow land, still gay with bright patches of vivid coloured asters and golden rod, with here and there clumps of willow and tamarac; no brush grew on the banks, which shelved at a gentle slope down to the clear running water. Way back inland for some distance the flats stretched until their grayish green merged into the darker line that marked the timber belt. Thin lines and patches of dark tint amid the intermediate ground showed where, about a small stream or muskeg, had grown up small colonies of spruce and poplar, willow and birch. Ahead, one saw

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that the forest had crept down to and enveloped the river.

There was nothing, however, within half an hour of the fort to conceal the river traveller from the gaze of anyone on the banks—though, to be sure, Harry Revell had no desire to keep his movements hidden from the Klondike party, whose camping ground he was rapidly approaching.

A few minutes of steady paddling brought him within sight of the camp, over which drifted lazily a thin trail of pale blue smoke. A man was dipping water from the river in a canvas bucket as the canoe drew abreast, and there was mutual recognition.

"Hello!" called Ed. Gardner genially. "Goin' fishin'?"

"Looks like it," returned Harry.

"Wish ye luck."

"Thank you."

Politeness costs nothing. Besides, ill as he suspected of the outfit, Harry was going to take care that no unnecessary act of his should precipitate a quarrel.

"Getting along with your repairing of the scow?" he asked.

"Sure; workin' against time," replied Gardner. "C'n see th' other fellers hard at it."

Harry could see. Both scows had been hauled up the bank and turned bottom upwards. Two fires were going, one by the tent and the other nearer the bank. Here and there lay the canvas-covered piles of stores.

"Say," called Gardner, as he prepared to go up the bank; and Harry looked back, paddle suspended.

"'F ye get more fish 'n ye're wantin', bring it along on yer way back, will ye? Mebbe we c'n do a trade. We ain't wantin' ter use up no more grub than's needful."

"Right you are. Depends on the catch," Harry answered, and continued on his way.

Fifteen minutes' paddling, and he had reached the point for commencing operations, fifty yards beyond where a thick wood of dark spruce and willow came down almost to the water edge. Drawing in, he put aside the paddle and took to his rod.

Within three minutes a fair-sized whitefish was being removed from the hook. Inside half an hour, it was a certainty that Harry would be able to oblige Gardner's hope of a trade. Then, very abruptly, his interest in the sport ceased.

Throwing out the line into the river again, he fixed the rod so it should not fall out of the canoe; the paddle was then made fast in a vertical position, and, on the end of it, he placed his wide-brimmed hat. To anyone not coming within a hundred yards it would seem as though he were still in the canoe. Stepping with care—for a canoe is a cranky craft—he went over the side and pulled himself up the bank. Without waiting an instant, he disappeared among the timber.

His direction was down river, and, having

neared the fringe of the wood, he selected a suitable tree and proceeded to climb it. Shortly, he was anchored in a comfortable position, and then came out the field-glasses.

From his perch, the glasses gave Harry a glorious and extensive view, a prospect over sunlit meadows jewelled with flowers through which the great river turned and twisted like a silver snake. But the landscape was not occupying Harry's interest—at least, no more than that part of it enclosing the camp of the Gardner outfit. Training the glasses on this spot, he glued his eyes to the lenses and kept them there.

Uninterrupted watching for any length of time is a mighty tedious business, a strain on one's stock of patience and pertinacity as well as a large and susceptible portion of the body. Harry's eyes began to ache; his hands and shoulders ached, his fingers went stiff. Pains developed in almost every square inch of his body, and he became heartily sick of his self-imposed job. But doggedly he stuck to it, although there happened very little to reward him.

There was nothing to interrupt his view of the camp, where the goldseekers were leisurely occupied (though the distance was responsible for the seeming absence of hurried labouring) with the scows, tending the fires, and trips to the river. It looked as though Harry had taken a deal of trouble and put himself to much inconvenience merely to witness a party of

men going through the performance of an innocent and necessary piece of work.

What he had hoped to see he didn't know; if he expected to see anything at all out of the ordinary he was disappointed. Yet, for a reason he could not have explained, he stuck to his uncomfortable post hour after hour, relieving the aching of his cramped muscles by such movement as his position permitted.

It was a profitless performance altogether.

"I'm wasting time," he told himself again and again.

But he stayed.

And in time he saw the men leave their work and gather together for a meal.

The Scandinavian youth, half a foot taller than the rest, was the last to obey the call to grub. He was working on the scow, the farthest from the cooking fire, and Harry saw him throw down his hammer. Thirty yards, perhaps, was the distance between the scow and the fire, but even that might not be walked until the cigarette in the youth's mouth had been re-lighted. Harry saw him move towards the bigger fire, stoop, pull up a blazing stick, light the cigarette, pitch down the stick, and then stroll over to join his companions.

"Reckon I'll have a bite, too," said Harry to himself.

The glasses were shoved into his pocket, and, with many a twinge of pain, he descended the tree. Back in the canoe, he ruefully remembered that, unless he ate raw fish, there was

no immediate meal for him. He had omitted to bring a lunch.

For a few seconds he hesitated whether to make a fire and cook. Concluding otherwise, he took down the paddle, picked up the rod, and set to work fishing.

Luckily for his stomach, the fish were still eager, and within an hour he had caught sufficient, he judged, to justify the length of his outing. Down stream he drove the canoe, was seen by some of the campers, and Jesse Gardner was waiting by the water as he came along.

"What luck? Enough to share?" the man shouted.

"Reckon so," Harry replied; and turned the canoe in.

"Had a lucky afternoon, kid, sure," said Gardner, looking into the canoe. "We're too all-fired busy to catch fish."

Within three minutes, two-thirds of his catch had been transferred to the bank, and he was ready to go on.

"How much?" Gardner asked.

"What they cost me to catch," Harry replied. "That's nothing."

He was not fishing for a living. It was nothing that he disliked the man.

Gardner stared, laughed, made some kind of a protest, but took the fish.

As he turned into the stream, a sudden violent puff of wind—the first he had felt that day—caught Harry on the back of the neck, took the light canoe within its embrace, and

for the next few seconds he was busy keeping himself afloat in the suddenly disturbed waters. Other puffs followed in rapid succession, giving him all the work he needed to avoid an upset, and keeping his attention so that a sudden commotion in the camp behind left him heedless. He heard voices raised in angry or alarmed shouting, but his immediate concern was with himself. He was not sorry when he made the landing at the fort.

Back at the house he was met by McCraw.

"Indian come see you," the half-breed announced. "He is waiting."

"From Fort Selkirk?" the lad cried eagerly.

No news had yet come down to him from Fraser, and he was beginning to feel a little anxious. Whatever it was had happened at the big post on the Mackenzie must be something serious that the factor had not found time to send even the smallest of messages to his assistant on the Lyard.

But John shook his head. "Indian from village."

"What's happened now?" Harry asked himself as he hastened towards the store, outside which sat an Indian stolidly smoking, as he had sat for two hours past.

Had further trouble with the Gardner crowd arisen?

But he was quickly relieved. The Indian was a messenger from Big Elk with the information that he would be at the post the next morning to buy cartridges.

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"Say, John," he said, when the old man brought in supper; "we'll have to loosen up for an early start to-morrow and a busy time ahead. The Indians are coming in."

CHAPTER VI

A PARTHIAN SHOT

To the Indian of the wide North West, a H. B. C. outpost, such as Fort Scott, was something more than a handy store whereat he might call in and replenish his waning stock of the necessities of life ; it was the means whereby his continued existence was secured. The factor was the storekeeper, wholesale dealer, and banker rolled into one.

Life during the summer was easy enough, and the Indian contented himself with the most moderate amount of work. Fuel was his for the gathering—by the squaws ; the rivers and lakes gave him an abundance of fish ; and meat was to be gained by not too toilsome hunting. But the winter was a very different proposition ; and, bereft of the factor's assistance, the Indian was in danger of starving. Fuel was still easily obtainable, but food of nature's providing was hardly come by, and scarce.

In the barren lands, and where the Company was not, the Indian knew starvation during the long and bitter winters. Not infrequently it killed him.

But the H. B. C. fort was an institution that meant life to the Red man. It supplied him with food at a time when food was hard to

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win ; it provided him with arms and ammunition, with axe and knife, blankets and cooking pots. And it demanded no payment therefor—at the time.

To the fort the Indian carried the skins of the creatures trapped during the winter, and with these made payment for the bacon and flour he had eaten, the tobacco he had smoked, the cartridges he had expended. For every kind of skin there was an agreed value ; and in the factor's possession was an exact record of the quantity and value of the goods the Indian had taken before winter commenced. Value given was adjusted against value returned ; and if the balance were in the Red man's favour, the same was honestly handed to him. If against him, then no more, or but little, was further advanced him until the debt had been wiped out.

Small wonder, it will be said, that the Company flourished and waxed rich under such conditions. The Company *did* flourish, and its gains were not small ; but, on the other hand, the Indian lived where otherwise he would have died of starvation.

Bad debts were few, for the Indian's code of commercial honour would do many a white man credit. Against this is the acknowledgment that the Company dealt fairly. At no period did its agents, unlike those of some rivals, pay the Indian for his pelts in villainous whisky. If its schedule of skin values included an insurance against loss, the Company

never dishonoured itself by repudiating an agreement.

Therefore the Red man trusted the H. B. C. factor, and faithfully brought him the furs.

To the Indian the obtaining of his winter supplies from the fort partook of the nature of a combination business transaction and holiday ; to be formally approached and thoroughly enjoyed ; anything but a hurried journey to a big shop and a scamper home again.

Hence the formal intimation from Big Elk.

After a breakfast hastily eaten before the sun was up, Harry Revell and McCraw were in the big storehouse, making preparation for the impending besiegement it would undergo. Shorthanded, they were going to find all their work cut out to get through the business. For the Indian is a dignified and dilatory shopper. He may know all that he wants, but he is not going to lessen by an iota his pleasure, or to get through in five minutes a purchase that he will carefully prolong into half an hour, if allowed.

True to his message, Big Elk made his appearance in the early forenoon, to offer and receive a dignified welcome. There was much he wanted besides the ammunition he had mentioned, and his manner in the storehouse suggested the intention of a lengthy stay. Yet politeness decreed that no attempt be made to help him get a move on.

Outside the store was gathering a crowd of Indians—the men of the tribe, the older ones

accompanied by their squaws, to whom would fall the carrying back of the purchased goods. By twos and threes, and in larger groups, they came riding up, the elders to dismount, squat down and gravely smoke, the younger men to ride races with each other, until such time as the chief's business should be through. Until that had happened, etiquette demanded no lesser Indian should enter the store. But their patience, or rather indifference to the passing of time, was great.

It was as well. McCraw's muscles, though still powerful, were stiff and slow, making him twice as long as Harry would have been in the lifting and carrying of the heavy bales and cases. And Big Elk's deliberateness was—Indian.

All things come to an end, however, and at last, the chief's requirements satisfied, a score of Red men crowded into the store, and Revell discovered need for the simultaneous occupation of ears, eyes, hands and voice, until one would have supposed that in the apparently hopeless confusion he had become wholly bewildered.

It was while attempting at one and the same time to direct McCraw, restrain the undue curiosity of the Indians, and keep track and written note of the varied items of each customer's choice, a diversion occurred.

Heavy and quick of foot, a white man broke unceremoniously upon the proceedings. Straight to where Harry sat he bored his way, pitching the Red men roughly from his path.

"Say, I'm wantin' you," he called in a loud voice, before half-way across the encumbered floor.

Harry looked up to see the anger-reddened face and smouldering eyes of Jesse Gardner.

"Anything wrong? You can see I'm pretty busy——"

"Busy or not, you got to listen," interrupted Gardner rudely, planting himself squarely in front of the table where Revell was seated.

The man was in a towering rage, which he was making no effort to control. His dirty, knotted hands were tightly clenched, and his manner menacing.

"These red hounds o' yours 've set fire to an' burnt up th' biggest part of my stores, 'n' I'm here to see what yer goin' to do abaout it," he exploded.

For ten seconds the two regarded each other steadfastly, the man with his chin aggressively forward, lean muscles knotted about the clamped jaws, eyes burning furiously; the Company's servant, with surprise and incredulity showing in his youthful face.

"Waal!" jerked out Gardner.

"I suppose you know what you're saying?" replied Harry.

"Saying! I'm telling you what's happened, an' no fatal error," returned the goldseeker. "Our stores 're burned; every bite of grub gone, and it's these red skunks o' yours hev done it."

Harry got up slowly. He was as tall a man

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as Gardner, and their eyes met level. He did not seem scared.

"Before we go any further," he said quietly ;
"whom are you accusing ?"

"These skunks—an' th' rest of 'em," answered Gardner, with a sweep of his hand to include the Indians in the store, who, after one stolid glance at the interrupter, had resumed their inquisitive examinations.

"And supposing what you say is true—and I don't know yet that it is—" A furious exclamation burst from Gardner, and he made a step forward, but Harry did not flinch—
"What d'you mean by coming up here and asking me what I'm going to do about it ?"

"Because you——"

"Go slow, my friend."

"Because you'll have to make good th' loss," finished Gardner, after a hesitation suggesting he had intended giving a very different reason.

"I will, will I ?"

"Yes, siree, you will. We gotten our scows put to rights, and I ain't allowin' to stay here no longer than I hev to, but we ain't movin'—we can't—without no grub, an' this yer's th' place where we get it. That's why." But the truculence in the speaker's manner was somewhat abated.

Now if Harry Revell had followed his impulse he would have answered in a fashion little calculated to promote the continuance of peaceful relations between himself and Gardner. The man's manner was domineering and aggres-

sive, not to say threatening. He had more than hinted at the acting-factor's association with the presumed authors of the misfortune which had happened to his outfit--had assumed his responsibility for the act anyway. He had put forward a demand which, his behaviour implied, he was prepared to back up with force. All of which was a big trial upon the patience and self-control of a young man of Harry Revell's temper and position.

At the same time, the young man realised the unwisdom of replying in similar strain. He was not going to sit down under the imputation made against him, but an open quarrel with Gardner would be imprudent. Besides, there was some excuse to be made for the anger of a man who had suffered what was truly a serious disaster.

Harry put a curb on his tongue and answered quietly:

"See here, Gardner; you're mad, and I reckon you're letting your tongue run away with a bit. You're saying, or suggesting, more than you really mean. You've had your stores burned out. Well, that's bad, mighty bad. But you're talking out of your hat if you suggest that I'm in any way responsible. Who is--well, that can be gone into later. I'm not; and you know it. Now about the replacing of your stores. Well, that's all right. There's nowhere at hand for you to go, and I'll be ready to do the best for you I can. But I can't attend to you just this minute; and I

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reckon there isn't any need either. You can see for yourself what I'm on at at present——."

"Foolin' araound with a passel of thievin', no-account varmin that 're goin' to pay up for what they done to me or I'll know why," interrupted Gardner violently, unable to restrain his impatience any longer.

"The Indians are laying in their stores for the winter, and it's my business to attend to them," returned Harry shortly.

"But not before me, I reckon."

"Yes, even before you, Mr. Gardner," said Harry in a steady voice.

"What you say?" Gardner's voice was again lifted, and his eyes filled with fury.

"Me a white man, an' you allows t' shove me aside while you tends to these yer red swine! Sufferin' Moses! d'you mean——"

"I mean that when these Indians are fixed up I'll do the best I can for you," replied Harry firmly.

Something rose in Gardner's throat, and the effort to swallow it back almost choked him. For a moment he contemplated Harry as though intending physical assault, but by a big effort controlled himself.

"Put those blame Indians in front of us whites!" he gasped, as if unable to give credence to such a monstrous intention.

"If you like to put it that way. The business of the trader here is to see that these Indians are provided with all they want to carry them over the winter. That's my job, and I'm

going to do it. It's part of what the Company pays me to do."

"To Halifax with th' Company an' th' hull lot of Indians, too," bellowed Gardner.

"Maybe you think so, but it isn't going to make any difference to me. And now, I reckon, this interruption has lasted long enough. I suggest you take a stroll outside and cool off a bit. I'll get rid of these fellows as soon as I can. By that time, maybe, you'll be feeling more calm and able to discuss matters in a reasonable manner, and I've no doubt we'll be able to come to a satisfactory arrangement together"; and with that Revell dropped into his seat and told McCraw to go ahead.

For a brief while Gardner looked him over uncertainly, and then, muttering something to himself about "th' son-of-a-gun payin' up good an' plenty later on," he stalked out of the store and went in the direction of the river.

Half an hour served to satisfy the wants of the Indians, and, closing the big ledger in which was entered against each man's name the goods and quantities for which he stood indebted to the Company, Harry went outside. For a while he was in earnest conversation with The Bull and Old Horse, two of the oldest men of the tribe, after which he informed the waiting Indians that the storehouse was closed until an hour after dinner. With a word to McCraw, he went in search of Gardner.

He found the man by the river; and Gardner at once got up and came towards him.

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"So y' are able to spare time from lookin' after yer Indian pets," he said with a sneer, as Harry joined him.

"I've closed down sooner than I'd meant in order that we can continue our previous talk," answered Harry. "And in a more friendly spirit, I hope," he added. "Now about this accident you've had."

"Accident!" snorted Gardner, and laughed harshly. "Guess it's goin' to be a plumb unlucky accident for someone. Ev'ry pound of our grub burnt t' ashes by them red varmin."

"Easy. Why d'you think it was the Indians who did it?"

"Think! I ain't doin' no thinkin', Mister Trader; I know."

"And what evidence have you?"

"Who else 'd 've done it, hey? Think! Shucks! I know; an' you know, too, whatever ye may say."

"I don't; and I don't believe it. I have questioned some of them, and they were as ignorant as myself of the accident. When did it happen?"

"Yes'day. Early evenin' Simmins guessed he c'd smell somethin' burnin', an' found it was th' pile o' grub. He whips off th' cover, an' th' hull blame pile goes off in a flame. Must 've been smoulderin' hours."

"And during those hours had you seen any Indian around your camp? It was light enough if any had been there."

"Oh, shucks!" exclaimed Gardner im-

patiently. "Think we nothin' to do but keep tab on them red swines? It was sure one of 'em. But that's not what I want you abaout. Guess that's a proposition I c'n handle myself without comin' to no trader. But those stores hev got to be replaced, and it's up to you to do it."

Neither words nor manner were the least conciliatory, but Harry overlooked that. The outfit was in a serious position, he fully realised, and it was not only his place to give all the assistance he could, but he was perfectly ready to do so, so far as it was in his power.

"What quantity will you want?" he asked.

"Eight thousand pounds," came the prompt answer.

"Then I can't do it," returned Harry after a swift mental calculation.

"Can't, hey! Why not? We mean t' pay you."

"Maybe; that's not the point. I haven't eight thousand pounds of food to spare."

"You ain't that much grub in th' fort?" said Gardner.

"Not to spare."

"But you hev it?" Gardner persisted.

"Yes; but——."

"You hev it, an' yet you won't sell it me?"

Harry shook his head. "Sorry, but I can't—not that huge quantity."

"Then what you goin' t' do with it?" challenged Gardner, his voice rising aggressively.

"Furnish the Indians with their winter supply."

"Hey!"

Gardner's lean, tanned face blazed under the gust of uncontrollable passion that seized and shook his big, bony frame. Fists clenched, he thrust his face within inches of Harry's.

"Ye mean t' say that ye'll feed those swine an' let me an' my pardners starve?" he cried fiercely.

"Not at all. I've told you——."

"Ye told me what I say. You—you son-of-a-gun, you! Let white men starve to feed these yer red varmin, will ye? By th' livin' powers, but if ye don't take those words back——."

"Here, hold on there," Harry interrupted, his own temper showing signs of getting frayed. "I've told you that I can sell you grub; you shall have it—every pound that I can spare; but right there is my limit. Eight thousand pounds I neither can nor will let you have. There's no reason why I should. Your demand's outside all reason. The food isn't mine, anyway. I'm in charge of it; and it's my duty to see that these Indians are provided against the necessities of the winter. Very well, I'm going to do it. If you can't go on without getting that quantity you demand, that's your bad luck. But to sell you all that food and know for a certainty it means a quarter, perhaps, of all the Indians in the village—say sixty human lives—being sacrificed to death by slow starvation, why I'm not going to do it, that's all. Give up your trip, since that is the alternative.

It's hard luck on you and the others, I admit, but it's the lesser of the two evils."

Scowling, lips working, Gardner glared at him, unable to find words.

"And what is more," went on Harry; "I reckon you have only yourselves to thank for this misfortune that's dropped on you. No Indian caused the loss of your stores. It was the carelessness of one of yourselves started the fire."

Into his mind had flashed the recollection of what he had seen from his perch in the tree the previous afternoon—the big Swedish youth carelessly flinging down the burning stick with which he had lighted his cigarette. He had noted, though giving no further thought to, the dangerously close proximity of the burning brand to one of the tarpaulin-covered heaps.

"An' that's yer last word, hey?" demanded Gardner, at last able to control his tongue.

"It is. I am sorry for you; but I don't mean jeopardising the lives of sixty fellow creatures——."

With a quick movement Harry leaped five feet backward, and Gardner's bear-like rush was abruptly checked by the sight of a swiftly drawn 38 calibre six-shooter, the muzzle directly covering his broad chest. And, half blind with passion though he was, he could see that the hand behind the gun was firm as a rock, and the eyes looking into his, steady and unwinking.

His hands dropped, and involuntarily Gardner recoiled.

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"Shoot ; shoot, you son-of-a-gun, if you can," he almost whispered.

Harry laughed curtly. He lowered his weapon, confident that the moment of danger had passed.

"I'm no man-killer," he said. "But it'll do no harm for you to understand I'm able and ready to defend myself. If you take my advice, you'll go back and tell your partners just what the position is. And if they're idiotic enough to refuse half the loaf because they can't get all the bread, the bigger fools they."

The passion was fading out of Gardner's face ; a cunning expression crept into his deep-set eyes.

"Say, Mister Trader," he drawled ; "there's two of ye up to th' fort ; me an' my pardners counts for six. What's to prevent us takin' th' grub ye refuses to sell us, hey ? Guess I'll go back 'n' talk it over with 'em. . So long."

Turning, he went up the river in the direction of the camp. Revell, the gun returned to his pocket, walked slowly back to the fort. Gardner's farewell had left him thoughtful.

CHAPTER VII

GARDNER MOVES

It was an indifferent sort of meal, old John McCraw having had less time than he wanted, and being both tired with unaccustomed exercise and aware that he had had to engage in the same; but Harry Revell ate dinner with his mind too thoroughly occupied to take note of imperfections.

Jesse Gardner's parting shot was worrying him, so that he was glad the marksman didn't know how much. And Harry could not get himself to believe he was taking the man too seriously. Sure, it might be his responsibility caused him to give Gardner an undue importance, but the American did not look the sort of fellow to indulge in talk such as he had used merely for the sake of effect.

If the threat was anything more than a bluff, the two men in the fort were in a tight corner. Coming to shooting, two stood the poorest of chances against half a dozen.

Not that Harry had any personal hostility to the notion of a fight. Acting in self-defence, he'd be justified anyway. It was his job as custodian of the post that troubled him. Did the Gardner outfit take it into their heads to burn down the fort, even if he himself survived, he could not see the Chief Factor adding any commendatory notes against his name in the

Company's records. The Company was not unjust in the treatment of its servants; but it was a noticeable fact that the unlucky man, the trader for whom circumstances proved too much, was not the man who received appreciation and advancement. Like Napoleon, the Company avoided the unlucky.

Moreover—and it was this hit him hardest—if anything went wrong, even though the Company should not find it necessary to dispense with his further services, there still would remain with himself the feeling that he had failed. And when one is eighteen, and hopes and ambitions are high, the contemplation of failure is disagreeable.

"Guess he's only bluffing after all," was the conclusion he arrived at with the end of his meal; and, shouting to the half-breed, Harry went back to the storehouse and six hours of solid hard work with the Indians.

Refusing to allow more than six at a time into the storehouse, he contrived to emerge from the contest with a reasonably clear head and some ground for believing that no serious mistakes had been made. McCraw was painfully slow (well, he couldn't help that) and the Indians were dilatory in their choice, and fickle. Having come to a decision, the entry made, a brave was just as likely as not to alter his mind under the direction of a roving eye. He had, too, a strong and perverse inclination to waste his substance—his credit, rather—upon articles of the smallest use to him, but

tickling to his fancy ; and much argument and persuasion were at times necessary from Harry to prevent the Red man making an unwise purchase. He behaved very much like a small child turned loose in a bazaar, and Harry found the combination of wise parent and trader a trifle wearying.

After two and a half full days of such excitement, it was with considerable satisfaction Revell looked around the much-depleted store-house and closed the door before going to dinner. The great event was over ; the Indians had received their winter supplies ; and he drew a long breath of relief. Nothing had happened to suggest that the tribe was other than fully satisfied, and the whole of the business had been carried through without a hitch.

Somewhat to his surprise, none of the Red men had attempted to take advantage of his own youth and want of experience. True, on more than one occasion there had arisen disputes and differences, and he had felt obliged to exert that authority proper to the position he filled ; but these incidents had given rise to no resentment. With a deal of childishness and cunning in his make-up, the Indian, like his white brother, is not above attempting to snatch an advantage if he thinks he may succeed ; but without unduly flattering himself, Harry Revell believed that such attempts had not been any more numerous than would have been the case had Donald Fraser been at his post.

And the Klondike party had made no demon-

stration. Truth to tell, Harry had been kept so busy that, since the talk by the river with Jesse Gardner, he had not given the man a thought. There had been no time. While in the storehouse his brain had been too fully occupied; and at night, when the day's work was done, he had been so thoroughly tired that something far more tangible than a threat would have been required to keep him awake.

"Hot air! Gardner lost his wool and said more than he meant," he told himself. "It is mighty hard luck on them, sure; but I reckon I'll see one of them around here before long to say they'll take all the grub I can spare. It's either that, or back to Fort Selkirk for them. I'll tally up to-morrow and see what quantity I can let them have."

The afternoon Harry spent in the luxurious enjoyment of his leisure, lying on the thick, soft grass about the store, and amusing himself with the making of pencil sketches—wherein he owned a certain talent—of the last departing batch of Red men and their wives.

Some of their purchases—the cartridges and tools—the men condescended to take away on their own ponies; but of the other goods, the packing upon spare ponies fell wholly upon the women, under the occasional critical supervision of their lords and masters, until these tired and rode off, leaving the women to follow when their work was completed.

Presently pencil and book dropped from

Revell's fingers and he was lying on his back in deep slumber.

Stolidly, without undue haste, the score or so of Indian women continued their work of packing and loading, until some thirty of the wiry little ponies were bearing each its load of stores and awaiting the signal to move off. The last package adjusted, the last hitch made, a careful search made to ensure that nothing had been left behind, and the women mounted, astride like men. Then the bunch slowly got on the move, two young bucks—who had remained behind for the purpose—in charge, one riding in advance, the other at the rear of the procession.

Along the trail from the fort went the train, at first almost parallel with the river, across the undulating meadow-land where the thick grass lay over in deep golden-brown tussocks so luxuriant that a man lying flat among them thirty yards distant would have been completely concealed. Here the ponies, left to themselves, would have strayed and halted for many a bite, but were kept together and on the move by the squaws' quirts.

Half a mile from the fort, the trail dipped and forked, where grew a single large spruce. The right-hand fork led to the Indian village, of which the tops of the scattered tepees were clearly visible.

As the tail of the train cleared the big spruce, the leading horseman reined in and threw up his hands to shade his eyes as he

stared intently at something unusual that had caught his alert gaze. The train came to a standstill, each pony docilely following the example of that ahead. The next instant a rattling fusillade of shots shattered the stillness. From all sides sounded the reports, which followed each other so rapidly as to indicate the surrounding of the train by a large force.

The two young bucks, startled by so sudden and unlooked-for an attack, lost their heads, but not to the extent of even temporary deprivation of the Red man's instinct of self-preservation. With a yell of surprise, each flung himself at full length along his pony, flattened out, hanging on by toes and fingers, and swept in a wide curve from the trail, taking different directions.

The alarmed squaws, paralyzed with fright by the shots and the sudden apparition of men with rifles in their hands rushing upon the train, firing as they came, remained stock still until the attackers were within almost touching distance. A few, desperate with fear, lashed their ponies into sudden movement, darting wildly away; the rest slipped from the saddle and huddled, each by her mount, to receive with Indian stoicism what fate should befall.

But neither of those that fled nor those that remained did the assailants take the slightest heed. Converging upon the pack train, every man carrying out his part of a concerted plan, they prevented a stampede of the scared animals. One went to the head, a second to

the tail of the procession, and the rest distributed themselves down the length, and, without the slightest loss of time, the train was on the move again, but diverted to the left of the track, so as to hit the fork that continued to follow the line of the river. There was no shouting of directions, no confusion. Quirts were snatched from some of the Indian women in passing, but they were in no other way molested.

Never was a surprise attack more complete and successful. Within thirty seconds of the first shot, the pack train was already being driven along the other trail at the pace of a running man. Not a single pony was missing.

Twenty minutes of hard-driving, and the camp by the river was reached, and Gardner and his companions were hurriedly unloading the packs, the stripped ponies being allowed to follow their own devices.

"Now that's what I call a real smart and successful operation. Boys, we done well," laughed Jesse Gardner, his experienced fingers rapidly releasing the squaw hitch fastening that secured a load.

And the comments of the others indicated they were as well satisfied as himself.

"Dump th' stuff down anywhere," their leader directed. "We c'n pile it up where we want it later. There'll be plenty of time before th' Indians get cavortin' araound with their affectionate enquiries. We don't want any animal hikin' off unloaded."

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But to this no pony showed the smallest inclination, satisfied to await patiently its turn for unloading.

"How soon, Jesse, d'ye reckon before our visitors arrive?" the man called Simmins made enquiry.

"Time enough for us to get all fixed up to welcome 'em," Gardner replied, in high good humour. He chuckled as though anticipating an A.R. joke. "They'll hev all kinds of fancy notions what they'll do to us, but I reckon it'll never occur to 'em what a glad surprise we got waiting."

"Won't see 'em for dust when they do find out," Ed. Gardner added. "What you think, hey? Can't you see 'em gettin' some rattled?"

The black-haired half-breed, to whom the question was addressed, merely grunted.

"It'd sure be a pity if we'd sweated as we did all day yes'day for nothin'," went on Gardner. "Say, Jesse, how much grub d'ye calculate we're to th' good for this afternoon's pasear, hey?"

"Why, let's see, Ed. There's thirty ponies I counted, 'n' I reckon they ain't loaded up with less 'n two hundred pounds each, maybe more, seein' what a short way they had to go. Thirty times two hundred—that's six thousand; six thousand pounds, I reckon."

"Mighty near to our allowance, hey!" chuckled his brother. "We won't want t' hit that trader feller so hard after all."

There was a pause, and then Simmins said,

gloomily : " How c'n we tell he'll part up with anything ? "

The other man of middle age, whose name was Joe Martin, nodded, as if in agreement with the doubt Simmins had expressed.

" How do we know ? " he repeated.

The brothers left off work for a moment to stare at the speaker. The elder scowled.

" What d'ye mean by that, Joe Martin ? " he demanded angrily. " What's bitin' ye about that kid ? Gee ! who's he to be makin' a kick that'll keep me from what I mean doin' ? "

" Waal, he don't look th' soft goods, fur as I c'n see," mumbled Martin, but avoiding meeting Gardner's angry scowl.

" That he don't, sure," corroborated Simmins.

The two men were friends ; men with the experience of a lifetime together in prospecting, but shiftless, improvident after their kind, and believing themselves unlucky, whereas they were simply too idle and weak of purpose to have made good. Gardner had picked them up in Seattle, where their talk had been running high as to what they'd do in the Klondike if only an unkind fate, by emptying their pockets, hadn't prevented them from being able to get there. They were men of the type that lacks initiative and persistence ; the kind that is content to drift with the current in preference to swimming against it ; that misses results for the want of resolution. But they were men, tough and seasoned ; and, because of their very weakness, might become really useful, even

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formidable, tools in the hands of a leader of strong character and with plenty of driving power. And in neither of these qualities was Jesse Gardner lacking.

So long had the two been together, that it seemed as though one mind served for both. Whichever spoke first, whatever he said, the other was certain to back him up.

"So that's yer belief?" said Jesse Gardner fiercely, looking from Simmins to Martin. "An' what d'ye reckon this feller's goin' to do when it's a choice between partin' up with what we want an' a bullet?"

Neither replied, although given time enough; and Gardner, after eyeing them in turn with anything but an affectionate expression, suddenly left the pony he was unloading and came towards them.

"Gettin' it into yer minds that I'm goin' t' take water over this grub proposition?" he wanted to know. "Is there any of you"—he looked around, lifted his voice to the party generally—"Is there any of you fellers who's meanin' t' back out if it comes to a show of guns for us t' get th' grub we want from th' fort that'll take us up where I mean goin'?" Is there any of ye findin' he's a yeller streak hid up in him? If so, by th' livin' water, but I'll find it out now and for sure."

"Why, Jesse——" began Ed. Gardner, but his brother made an impatient gesture.

"I know you, sure, like I do myself. I wan't meanin' you," he said. .

No one else answered.

The half-breed unconcernedly went on with his work. The colossal Scandinavian youth smiled and nodded his head vigorously as though affirming his staunchness; Simmins and Martin glanced at each other nervously. To them the leader turned directly.

"Now; are you in this wi' me as fur as I go, or are you not? Yes or No, but I mean knowin' which."

"Why, sure we're with you, Cap; you knows we are, all th' way, an' then some," answered Martin in a hearty voice, but after a slight hesitation. He looked at his friend.

"Why, sure we are, Jesse," said Simmins with some haste.

"Then I reckon we know how we stand, an' there's no need for croakin'," Gardner returned grimly, after a long pause; and he went back to his work.

For a few minutes the whole outfit hurried along with the unloading, and then Ed. Gardner spoke.

"When d'ye mean tacklin' this jim dandy trader feller, Jesse?"

"Just so soon as we can. Th' fort won't move. We'll hev th' red varmin along here mighty soon, meanin' t' raise Cain an' get their grub back; but they're goin' t' quiet down a whole lot when they find out what we fixed up for 'em. They'll take a day, mebbe two, after that, t' think out how they c'n do anything mean to us. They won't be takin'

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no chances anyway; those skunks never do. Then two of us 'll hit th' trail for th' fort an' persuade that Revell kid. Ten of these yer ponies we'll keep back an' take along with us t' pack th' stuff. When they're loaded up, we'll rush 'em back here. Th' game's in our own hands then. Two 'll be enough t' keep the Indians busy if they gets lively, while th' rest gets th' scows into th' river 'n' loaded up. Soon 's it gets dark, we'll hike out of here quick; an' we'll be twenty miles before anyone knows we're gone."

"Sounds good," agreed Ed. Gardner. "An' what happens if th' Indians try an' rush ye when comin' back with th' ponies?"

"Why then I reckon there'll be some shootin'," his brother drawled. "Come, boys, get a move on. You, Simmins, get a holt of them ten ponies we want. Th' pack ropes 'll do fine for picketin' them. What is it?"

The question was for the half-breed, who was standing perfectly still, his eyes fixed in the direction of the Indian village. He raised one arm and pointed. Gardner, brows drawn, peered across the bright meadow-land.

At the same moment, Harry Revell was starting from the fort in the direction of the camp.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ANGER OF THE YOUNG MEN

Grown accustomed by the force of necessity to depend entirely upon himself for his own safety, the Red Indian has within him the primal instinct of self-preservation developed to a higher degree than has the white man, in whom centuries of civilisation have bred a subconscious reliance upon circumstances outside himself. All Indian fighting proves the concern the Red man has for his personal safety.

Their wits disorganised and scattered abroad by the swift suddenness with which the pack train had been attacked, Burnt Wood and The Rabbit removed themselves from the unlooked-for danger which had swooped down upon them with a rapidity that would have been no discredit to the fleetest of wild creatures. Each jumped his pony at once into a headlong gait, and maintained the same until a backward glance made certain that risk of immediate injury had been left behind.

Then their separate lines of flight converged until they met, a good two miles distant from where stood the lone spruce.

Reining in the blowing ponies, the two young bucks sat with eyes glued upon the black dots which stood for the rapidly disappearing pack ponies.

No harm had befallen Burnt Wood; but

The Rabbit had somewhat to show. A chance bullet had made a double hole in his shirt sleeve, another had grazed his cheek, on which appeared a thin trickle of blood.

Swift as had been their removal, neither had failed to mark the identity of the assailants; but it was not until well on the way in the direction of the village, to which by silent agreement they turned the ponies' heads, that a single word passed between them.

It was Burnt Wood broke the gloomy silence.

"We are shamed. The very squaws will laugh at us," he spoke gloomily.

But to this The Rabbit could not agree. Was there not blood upon his bronze cheek?

"Two may not fight with six," he declared sententiously.

This was an assertion so wholly expressive of Indian fighting ethics that his companion could only grunt acquiescence.

None the less, Burnt Wood could not but feel that his reputation had suffered. He could foresee that he and his companion were in the disagreeable position of being held up to ridicule by the whole village. And the Red man, for all his stoicism, is able to bear being laughed at with no greater fortitude than his white brother displays. With a strong, if well hidden, sense of mordant humour, the Indian dislikes greatly being the object of the mirth of others.

So, after great thinking, Burnt Wood spoke, making proposals, and The Rabbit listened readily, grunting approval at appropriate in-

tervals, now and again throwing in suggestions of his own. And as they talked, the more feasible grew the enterprise discussed, the more certain its assurance of success. Before the village came in sight, the two young men had framed out and arranged details of a very definite plan, a plan so satisfying that there even began to grow within them a feeling of satisfaction that an opportunity to use it had been given to them. Their spirits rose ; their moodiness departed.

So great is the power of words ! So easy is it to convince ourselves that what we desire shall happen will prove easy of accomplishment ! It is the convincing of others that presents the difficulties.

In this, however, the young men were fortunate—and with good reason. So thoroughly had the Gardner outfit succeeded, by its arrogance and contemptuous disregard for consideration, in arousing irritation and resentment amongst the younger men of the village, that Burnt Wood and The Rabbit found eager listeners. Brief argument and little persuasion were required to make a score of the warmer blooded young bucks as confident as the two self-constituted leaders of the enterprise that nothing would be more easy than to raid the camp down by the river ; to recover the pack ponies ; and, in addition, to collect a very satisfactory amount of plunder. Better still, their reputation as men of bravery and consequence would be indisputably established.

In a very short while weapons were collected and ponies saddled without attracting the attention of the older men or of the chief, who were entirely ignorant of what was going on. The women felt no curiosity, asked no questions. Indian women are built that way.

Fortunately for the raiders, none of the women who had been with the pack train had yet returned to the village. They were still too scared.

By twos and threes, without ostentation or noise, the party left the village, to take a northerly direction, which was changed as soon as the tepees were well out of sight. Coming round in a sweeping curve, the riders headed for the river.

Surprise is the very essence of Indian fighting strategy. It was the element upon which the success of this enterprise depended, and the Indians were thoroughly satisfied that it was with them.

Distant a mile and a half from the camp, the horsemen, orderly and without haste, drew out into a long, crescent-formed line, a full thirty yards between each rider. Then the line swept forward, a splendid sight, ponies gradually urged into a headlong speed, rifles swung above the riders' heads, from which the long hair streamed out straight behind.

It was the traditional swoop of the Indian braves, although never before had a single one of the excited young men taken part in such in real earnest.

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But the expectation of taking the goldseekers by surprise was a miscalculation. The vigilance and experience of the white men had been underrated. The headlong charge by which Gardner and his party were to be enveloped and resistance squeezed out of them, or else driven ignominiously into the river, proved a failure.

Jesse Gardner had not overlooked the possibility of what actually had happened, and his claim to experience of Indian fighting was no boast. Calculating what was likely to happen, he had taken care that excellent provision was made against any success resulting.

"Drop them packs, boys ; 'n' down ye go," he shouted, immediately he had satisfied himself as to the half-breed's words of warning.

The order was obeyed without delay or confusion. Each of the six men slipped himself into one of the near-by rifle pits Gardner had caused to be dug the day before ; and before the charging line of ponies, the outer ones bearing inwards, had covered a further fifty yards, the muzzles of half a dozen '303 Winchester were pointing their way.

"Don't let go a shot, boys, until I fire," shouted Jesse Gardner. "Then ye c'n cut loose 'n' give 'em sicks."

Rifle stocks cuddled down to cheeks, eyes squinting along the sights, the six white men quietly awaited the oncoming raiders.

At eight hundred yards the Indians started shooting, and the ponies, reins lying loose on

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their stretched-out necks, hustled into a still faster pace under the stimulus of the sharp, barking reports snapping out irregularly from different parts of the line.

It was sheer waste of good cartridges. Even though the whites had not had the protection of the rifle pits, there was not a one-in-a-hundred chance of the bucks, firing from the saddle at that headlong speed, getting a bullet home on its target. The distance was too great, anyway; and the average Red man is not an exceptional marksman. But it is the Red man's way—always has been his way. He just has to shoot when he charges, regardless of the waste of ammunition. So these young Cree bucks held to the Indian tradition, and possibly did themselves some good, although doing no harm to their enemies.

Seven hundred yards—six hundred; the wild fusillade continued, spattering harmless lead over the landscape, and still Jesse Gardner's fore-finger did not tighten its squeeze on the trigger. And then from the extreme left-hand pit came a report.

"Now to Halifax with that Dutchy!" exclaimed the leader savagely.

Ole Oleson, the colossal Scandinavian youth, had been unable to keep his nerve under the strain, and had loosed off.

Simmins and Martin, and Charley Ring, the half-breed, followed suit; and a withering outburst of insult and anger at such folly left the leader's lips. At anything over four hundred

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yards the Winchester is not to be relied upon to kill, and Jesse Gardner had made up his mind that the shooting should be to kill. The Red men were to be taught a lesson that would leave behind a deep respect and fear of his party. And now that yellow-haired young fool had spoiled the chance!

"Quit that blame fool shootin'," Gardner roared furiously.

It was enough to make a man mad. Another ten seconds, and there would have been maybe a half-score of those cayuses galloping riderless.

But the chance had passed. The courage of the bucks was not equal to continuing the charge. Round went the ponies' heads, right and left from the centre, and the Indians swept across the front of the rifle pits in two curving lines at a pace that took them quickly beyond range.

A thousand yards back from the pits they halted, joined up and talked the matter over. One or two of the ponies had been hurt, and all the riders were annoyed. The plan had not worked according to programme, and there was a slight feeling of resentment against The Rabbit and Burnt Wood in consequence. What was to be done? A further dash in spite of the white men's bullets and carry out the original scheme, or back to the village in humiliation?

Minds had not been made up when Harry Revell came riding along the trail from the fort to the landing.

It was the fusillade heralding the dash of

the goldseekers upon the unsuspecting pack train had aroused Harry from the pleasant slumber into which he had fallen, but the true significance of that shooting had not come to him. He reckoned—and it was a most reasonable assumption—that some of the Red men were making trial of the recently purchased rifles and ammunition—a performance quite in accord with the Indian character. His curiosity was not excited further.

Getting on to his legs, Harry gave himself a vigorous shake.

“Come along; this won’t do, you know,” he told himself. “Get a move on, you loafer. Go and have a look round the store, and see just how much in the way of grub you’ll be able to let that Gardner outfit have.”

So into the store he went, to find, his admonition notwithstanding, that his inclination for work was very far from keen. He reached no further than a pretence at work; and then, a fresh idea coming into his head, he climbed the ladder by which one obtained entry into the huge loft that was overhead the entire store. More than once he had promised himself the indulgence of rummaging amongst the collection of varied old junk stored there. But the loft was as black as a pine wood at midnight, and Harry stumbled his way to open one of the heavy wooden shutters that covered the unglazed window openings, one on each side of the loft.

Throwing back a shutter, he pushed head

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and shoulders through the opening, his eyes travelling idly over the far-reaching expanse of gold-tinted meadow-land to the far distance of the darker hue of the forest.

A few moving dots, figures on horseback, caught his glance. And then it abruptly occurred to him that he could not see the long train of the laden Indian ponies. The window overlooked the direction which the train should be taking to reach the Indian village; but sign of the animals there was none, although, keeping to their proper trail, it was not possible they could have so completely vanished out of sight. And then there were the swiftly, yet apparently aimlessly, moving riders.

In a hurry, and yet with no definite idea in his mind to explain such haste and curiosity, Harry went down the ladder to find his field glasses.

But, back at the window, these helped him but little beyond informing him that those aimless riders were Indian women, and probably those who should have been taking care of the pack ponies.

And then he picked up a couple more riders, moving together and slowly, heading from where lay the Cree village. He watched them for half a minute as they went north; then three more made their appearance, followed at an interval by a single horseman. Others followed, until Harry had counted a score, all taking the same direction. In a few minutes they had travelled beyond range. He could not under-

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stand it at all. The fact that it was an armed party added to his perplexity, and caused him a feeling of uneasiness.

A little while, and this became a definite suspicion. The Indians he had seen were bound for Gardner's camp, meaning, doubtless, to give expression to the ill-feeling the white men had bred by their arrogance and manifest hostility.

If that were the case, there was only one thing for him to do : Gardner must be warned at once and the Indians prevented from carrying out their intention. The Gardner outfit, indeed, had only itself to thank for such ill-feeling, but it was out of the question that the Red men could be permitted to take matters into their own hands in this way. There was no question how Fraser would have acted in such circumstances, and he, Harry, must do as Fraser would.

Harry left the store in a hurry, caught and saddled his pony, and at a quick pace started for the camp.

The wild shooting of the charging bucks made his suspicion a certainty ; and, reproaching himself for being too late, he quirted his pony to its utmost speed. Expecting to find the camp overrun and the surviving prospectors engaged in a desperate and unavailing fight for life against an overwhelming crowd of enemies, he was sensible of a feeling of profound relief when his eyes assured him that his fears had misled him. Gardner's camp appeared to be deserted ; but

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the tents still stood ; over a low-burning fire a big kettle still swung. There was evidence of surprise in a confused medley of packs scattered about the grass, but none at all of the kind of disaster Harry had feared.

Whatever had happened, it was not as bad as he had anticipated.

His ranging eyes picked up the mounted Indians halted on a distant ridge, and he made a better guess at what had taken place. An attack had been made, but it had been beaten off—with considerable effect if the riderless ponies he could see represented Indian casualties.

"Thank Heaven that it's no worse!" Harry said aloud. "Though it's bad enough."

And then he heard a lusty voice bellowing.

"Hands up! An' you stay right there."

Swinging round, Harry saw Jesse Gardner standing close to the rifle pit from which he had emerged, with Winchester levelled to give emphasis to the command.

"Hands up!" repeated Gardner.

"Oh, don't act the fool!" shouted back Harry; and without further ado he shook the reins and trotted the pony across the fifty yards separating Gardner from himself.

"Keep yer eye, Ed., on th' bunch in front; I'll tend to here," called Jesse Gardner over his shoulder. "You will have it, then," he muttered, as he turned about.

And squinting along the sights, he loosed off at Harry, who, for the bullet went a foot above his head as he ducked, brought the pony to

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a standstill within six feet of him and dismounted in no amiable temper.

"Are you crazy, man?" demanded Harry angrily. "What in thunder d' you mean shooting at me? Lost your nerve altogether? What's all this rumpus that's taking place? And put that rifle down."

Gardner might not have lost his nerve, but rattled he certainly was by the contemptuous indifference to his weapon Harry had shown; for it requires a very cool brain and a steady hand to shoot straight at a charging man who betrays no more anxiety about the weapon covering him than if it were a pea-shooter. So far as he could see, Harry was unarmed; and, in face of an exhibition of such cold-drawn nerve, his own weakened. Though his face remained grim and threatening, the rifle came down to his hip.

"You've got a gall, sure, wantin' t' know what's th' racket, after settin' them red devils on us," he snarled. "Snoopin' araound lookin' fer any pieces of us yer friends 've left, I reckon. Wal, yer too early, my son. We ain't handed in our checks yet, an' don't mean to, not even t' oblige no son-of-a-gun of a H. B. trader. Reckons, don't ye, that yer th' boss Muck-a-muck up along here, wi' them red varmin runnin' to heel like dogs when yer calls, hey? That's yer style! But it don't go, siree; not wi' me nor no other citizen outer God's own country, whatever ye may do with Dutchmen an' Canuck trash. You get me all right? Say, you'd

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better ; an' get me hard. Yer ways 'n' yer high-'n'-mightiness don't go with Jesse Gardner no further 'n you can spit. Them that comes t' handle Jesse Gardner finds they're up against a stiff proposition. I'm here t' do what I means t' do, though ev'ry H. B. son-of-a-gun between Fort Yukon an' James Bay busts himself tryin' to prevent me. Get me ? "

The words came out in a breathless hurry, the man's voice rising as he worked himself into a passion. With his final question he went forward a step, lifting the muzzle of his rifle as he thrust his beak nose and smouldering eyes within six inches of the lad's face.

There was courage wanted to stand up and look back into that face of brutal passion and savage hatred without a flicker of the eyelids or a quiver of the lips, and from somewhere Harry found it. Truth to tell, he felt too disgusted to be scared.

"You're talking like a fool, Gardner ; and you aren't worth listening to," he said coldly. "I hear this shooting racket going on ; I come down to see what's the matter ; and you begin to talk like a man gone crazy."

"Just came along t' see what was th' matter, hey ? " sneered Gardner.

"Why sure. You've alarmed and irritated these Indians ; I know how they're liable to get above themselves ; and, thinking they might mean mischief, I came along to give you warning in case they might get started before I could head them off."

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An unpleasant grin crept about Gardner's thin lips.

"So that's it, mister, is it?" he said.

"It is; and——."

"So you reckoned you c'd head 'em off, hey? You hustled along here to give me warnin'?" mimicked Gardner. "Feeling plumb anxious you was, that we might get hurt? Why——," the grin disappeared, and his voice rose into a hoarse shout—"Why, you son-of-a-gun! After you settin' them red swine onto us, you——."

"Stop!"

Provoked by this repetition of a lying and unlooked-for accusation, a wave of hot and angry blood swept over Harry's face, reddening him from forehead to throat. His fingers left the pony's reins in swift impulse to take Gardner by the throat, and the man's head went backward involuntarily before the blaze of white-hot indignation that leaped into the lad's eyes.

Harry's self-control might have proved unequal to the strain laid upon it, when at that instant from behind came a shout of urgent warning.

"Hey, Jesse; they're comin' again."

Round went Gardner's head, and Harry, looking across his shoulder, took in the sudden breaking up of the dark group of riders upon the ridge into an extending line.

The Rabbit and his companions had made up their minds.

Before Gardner had got on the move to dart back to his pit, Harry had vaulted into the

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saddle, finding the stirrups as he jumped the pony into immediate action.

The development that the hostility between the prospectors and the Indians had already reached was serious enough; whatever the risk attending it, the most strenuous effort had to be made to prevent it going farther. At all costs, actual shedding of blood must be prevented. And there were very real risks. As he dashed across the line of rifle pits, the uncomfortable thought flashed into Harry's mind that any moment might happen the loosing off of a rifle and the sensation of a bullet in his back. Jesse Gardner was fully capable of such.

The Red men, too, might prove difficult to turn from their manifest purpose. Under certain excitements, the Indian is capable of becoming as headstrong as a wounded buffalo; as stubborn and intractable as an army mule. There is a stage at which he is like a pig—neither to be led nor driven. If those he was racing to intercept had reached that stage, not all his authority as a Company's official, the personal good feeling of the Red men towards himself, would be allowed to hinder them in the accomplishment of their object.

Harry's eyes swept the line of galloping riders with the hope of identifying Big Elk. True, in some respects the situation would be still more serious if the chief had put himself at the head of this retaliatory raid; on the other hand, Big Elk, with his greater wisdom, his profound regard for the Company, would

be more amenable to such influence and persuasion as he could exert, so Harry believed, than young men of the tribe.

But the hope was vain. The Indians were all young men, as he speedily recognised; and it was with scant expectation of his intervention proving a success that he abruptly reined in his pony and, arms widely spread, lifted up his voice in a stentorian command to halt.

"Halt right there!" he shouted at the top of his voice, angrily, and with as confident a note in his voice as though he had a score of levelled rifles behind to enforce his command.

Fifty yards distant he stood, facing the centre of the curving line sweeping down upon him without the slightest slackening of pace.

They were riding almost knee to knee now, having adopted a different form of attack, believing that the close, serried rank would shake the nerve of their enemy, as their previous open formation had failed to do, although they meant a spreading out to accomplish an encircling movement when closer to their foe. And to Harry there came the realisation of the failure of his attempt. A few more moments, and he would be ridden down and trampled under the spurning hooves, with crushed body and ears closed against the clamorous outburst of rifles, the yells of the attackers, and the defiant shouts of the attacked.

A queer thrill ran through him, a physical quivering from neck to toes, with the lightning-

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like anticipation of the coming shock. Even more rapidly flashed from his brain the warning to secure his safety, to avoid the fate that appeared certain. A lift of the rein, a quick touch of his heel, and his pony would be withdrawn from the front of the impending death.

Neither was hand lifted nor foot jerked back.

Forty yards—thirty yards: he could see the tiny balls of sweat on the straining copper bronze faces above the flattened ears of the galloping ponies.

Twenty yards: his steady eyes detected the slight movement of the dilated nostrils of the Indian in the middle of the line on whom his gaze had concentrated—a narrow-faced young man with his black, straight-cut hair so low over his forehead as to conceal his eyebrows, and with a few spots of blood on the left sleeve of his shirt.

The impulse to close his eyelids was almost irresistible, but not quite. Features set, he faced them as though he and his pony were cast in metal.

Still nearer! Yes, the dark face was enlarging, the beads of perspiration were growing bigger. How much longer before——

Suddenly came a shout; a cry of fierce, intense anger, a cry emitted straight from the throat, that harshly forced its way through firmly clenched teeth. To Harry it did not seem as though the voice were his.

“I told you—Halt!”

CHAPTER IX

HARRY INTERVENES

The face of The Rabbit came no nearer, grew no larger, though to Harry it seemed that it was for hours he watched it. He wondered why.

Then he became conscious of the fact that he could hear nothing; the unshod hooves of the Indian ponies were making no noise upon the thick, soft grass.

That, too, was odd.

Without looking at them directly, he discovered that the forelegs of The Rabbit's cayuse had suddenly altered as to position. How could that be? They were now perfectly straight and stiff.

All at once, the deafness that must have fallen upon him left his ears, which became conscious of faint, barely audible sounds. A transparent veil seemed to be withdrawn from across his eyes. He felt a rushing of blood through his veins.

As from a dream he stepped out, but wide awake, alert, every sense primed to the utmost acuteness. A curious feeling of exceptional vigour and physical power filled him.

The close line of mounted Red men was at a standstill in front of him, with a bare ten feet between the muzzle of his own pony and that of The Rabbit's cayuse, which, like those

on either side, had been wrenched to so sudden and complete a standstill that the animal was sitting back almost on its haunches.

At that last command he had shouted, the order he had been hardly conscious of uttering, the Indians, their purpose weakening with every yard that brought them nearer to the figure so steadfastly barring their onset, had pulled up.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Harry in a stern voice, speaking their own tongue, as he moved closer towards the line. "Is it for killing that you go to meet the white men by the river? If not, why these rifles that you carry—the shooting that my ears have heard? If it be that you have killing in your hearts, my brothers, then you have acted foolishly, and worse than foolishly. You have done evil."

A score pair of sullen black eyes were fixed on his, but no one of the bucks answered.

Harry pulled up his pony, leaned over, and touched The Rabbit sharply on the wrist with his quirt.

"Answer me," he ordered peremptorily.

The young Indian drew his body back sharply as one afraid. His sullen eyes wavered.

"We meant killing," he grunted, looking away.

"Then you meant evilly, you and these with you. And for those who mean and do evilly there is punishment."

Then the man at the end of the line spoke—

one of the young men whom Harry had found with Gardner's jar of whisky.

"The white men have taken our goods," declared Chicken-with-many-Feathers sulkily. "We go to take them back. We know the white men; therefore we go armed."

"What is that you say?" asked Harry.

"The white men have robbed us. We would take our own back again," returned the Indian.

And from his comrades arose deep grunts of approval.

Then Harry was reminded of the many and diverse packs he had seen scattered about the ground while Jesse Gardner had been threatening him. Had Gardner and his party——? But instantly he dismissed the suspicion.

He spoke sharply to the sulky young buck. "You speak of being robbed by the white men, brother. Have a care. Already you have done ill; add not lying to your wickedness."

"Brother, I do not lie," retorted Chicken-with-many-Feathers. "I speak only the truth. The white men have robbed us. We would but take back again our own. Is it not so?"

He turned to the rest, and from each came short words of confirmation. Their faces were earnest. None but looked Harry fairly in the eyes.

"Of what were you robbed?"

"Chiefly of food, brother; of food that you at the fort had given unto us," answered Chicken-with-many-Feathers promptly.

Again Harry thought of those packs. If the

charge was true ; if his suspicion was correct, a different complexion was put upon this hostile demonstration by the young men.

"Tell me," he commanded curtly.

And The Rabbit told of the attack on the pack train, the swift surprise and superiority of numbers that had made resistance by him and Burnt Wood a thing impossible. He did not forget to show his bullet-pierced sleeve, the blood spots on his arm.

"And so, my brother," he concluded simply, "I and these with me did but go to the white men to take back what was ours and of which we have been robbed. And because the white men are fierce and ready with their rifles, therefore did we, also, take our weapons. It is the truth. I have not lied."

"And does your chief know of this? Did you go to him and tell him of this shame and theft the white men had put upon you?" demanded Harry, after a pause.

The young Indian hung his head.

"No, brother," he answered in a low voice.

"Then you did wrong. And because of doing that wrong was I angry with you," said Harry. "And punishment will doubtless come to you and these with you, because you have acted in haste and with foolishness. Who are you that you should go on the warpath except at the advice of your elders and by the order of your chief?"

"We were robbed," asserted the Indian with sulky defiance.

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"Yes ; we were robbed," cried his companions in concert.

Their sullen, angry eyes never left his face as he sat anxiously thinking. The situation was a critical one ; his own position one of doubt and difficulty. These young Indians had acted wrongly in what they had done, and yet, if their story was true—as he was inclined to believe—morally they had done what was right.

They had sought to regain possession of goods stolen from them. It was an act that hardly needed defence. Big Elk, the counsellors of the tribe, when they came to know what had happened, would surely uphold the intention of their braves, even though censuring the manner of its carrying out. The insult, and the injury, the Indians surely would not pass over. To expect them to do so would be absurd. They had been spoiled of the food by force ; by force would they hold themselves justified in getting it back again.

And justified they would be, Harry admitted, Red men though they were, and their spoilers white men. In the far North West there ran no easy process of law by which the robbed could obtain restitution or compensation. The law was shadowy and distant, and men acted for themselves.

But, although his own sense of right and justice might approve such act, clearly it was impossible that he, a white man, should stand by and see half a dozen of his colour murdered, guilty though they were. For murdered they

would be most assuredly if they sought to prevent by force the restitution the tribe would inevitably attempt.

In addition to the horror of such blood spilling, the vindication of the Red men's rights by force of arms meant much to himself.

The killing accomplished, the Indians would certainly not remain in the district for fear of the punishment that would fall when the news reached the police, as it certainly would, sooner or later. The flight of the tribe meant the utter loss to the post of a winter's fur trapping. It meant the loss of the value of the goods and stores with which he had provided the Red men. To suppose the return of the winter's stores was absurd; a later redemption of the debt highly improbable. Having gone to the length of killing, the Red men would hardly boggle at the crime of stealing.

Harry Revell saw himself being shoved into an awkward corner.

However great their respect for the Company; however genuine their liking for himself; the Indians would not tamely submit to the wrong done to them. No man would, whether his colour were white or red. And with the Indians was the physical power to enforce restitution and inflict punishment.

"The fools! The short-sighted, sinful, criminal fools!" thought Harry bitterly. "Gardner must be crazy to suppose that he can do such a thing as this and get away with it. Hasn't he thought of the consequences?"

What should he do? That was the question troubling him.

It was characteristic of the young man that his question was not "What can I do?"

He did not want any telling that actually he had no *locus standi*, that he had no sort of right to interfere between the Red men and those who had injured them—no right, that is, over and above the moral right every and any person with a respect for the law of truth and justice has to interfere in the commission of a great wrong or injustice.

To sit quietly by and do nothing was a cowardice of which he was simply incapable, although well knowing that any active interference must mean danger to himself.

It was a cowardice, however, to wish that there were at hand some of the wearers of the uniform of the North West Mounted Police, the guardians of the plains, the maintainers of the law, the terror of evil doers of whatever colour.

But wishing was futile. The nearest police post was at Red Fort, four hundred miles distant and, in between, an almost unexplored country where the only paths were a few vague and seldom used Indian trails. For all practical purposes the police might just as well be on the farther side of Behring's Strait.

If anything was to be done, he would have to do it himself and by himself. And he'd have to do it quickly. For the moment he had checked these young bucks; they mustn't be

given time to overcome the irresolution with which he had inspired them. There was no time to think out a plan to cover all possible contingencies; sufficient for him to break up this attempt at immediate killing.

He looked up, did not miss the signs of impatience the Indians already were displaying, and addressed their leader.

"You have done foolishly," he said in a loud, angry voice. "How foolishly you will learn from your chief. To do wrong does not undo a wrong done to you. Are you a chief, that these others should obey you? Ask Big Elk. This is no matter for such as you to decide upon. Think you that Big Elk will be pleased that his place has been taken by a young and untried boy? Return to your village, and tell your chief that presently I will come to him; that the great Company under whose protection he and his live is aware of the injury done to him, and that those who did the injury shall not be permitted to go unpunished. Go!" And Harry pointed in the direction of the village.

For a few moments vanity and irresolution struggled together; then the Red men with one accord wheeled their ponies and at a steady lope made for the village.

Satisfied that this obedience was no mere pretence, Harry turned about and came leisurely across the meadows towards the rifle pits. As he drew near, first Jesse Gardner and then the rest of the party rose from their places of concealment and stood watching him curiously.

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The leader, after a few seconds, moved as though to intercept him.

"Sent yer friends home again, hev ye?" he called out when within speaking distance.

Harry made no reply—did not even look at the man, but continued on his way. Gardner came to a standstill.

"Reckon ye found ye'd bitten off consid'able more 'n ye c'd chew, eh?" he said, as the lad came abreast.

Still he was given no answer, and, as though irresolute, he watched Harry reach the line of the rifle pits and continue forward. Then Gardner roused himself.

"Hey, Mister Trader, where yer goin'?" he bawled. "Hold on."

He might just as well have been off the earth. Ed. Gardner ran forward a few paces, glanced round at his brother, and stopped. The men from the farther pits moved slowly towards camp.

Suddenly Jesse Gardner, with a savage exclamation, started in pursuit. Passing Harry, he turned about and, snatching at the pony's bridle, brought the animal to a standstill.

"Where yer goin'?" he repeated thickly. "Who in thunder gave ye leave t' come pokin' around my camp?"

"I'm not asking leave," was the cool rejoinder. "I'm curious about these packs lying around here. They seem familiar, and I mean looking at them. And let go my rein."

"Th' blamed gall of him!" exclaimed Gard-

ner; and, in sheer surprise, he released the rein and stepped back.

Ignoring him completely, Harry glanced over the varied assortment of boxes and cases lying around just as they had been removed from the ponies. The most cursory examination was sufficient. Without hesitation he went towards Jesse Gardner. His brother had joined him, and they were whispering together.

"D'you realise what this crazy blunder of yours is likely to let you in for?" he asked quietly.

The lad's calm fearlessness seemed to excite Gardner to exasperation.

"An' d' *yew* realise, yew meddlin' whelp, yew, that yer standin' only a mighty few inches outside yer grave?" he shouted violently.

"Keep your temper and your threats for a time when they'll be useful," Harry advised. "And make less play with that Winchester; it's trouble for nothing. At first I didn't believe the yarn the Indians told me. I reckoned you were a man with more sense than to do what you have done. They told me that your outfit had forcibly taken from them stores I'd sold them at the fort, and I didn't believe them. But now I can see for myself that the story's true enough."

"Ye'll see a plenty things, kid, before yer a whole lot older," Ed. Gardner said, grinning.

"He will, Ed.—if he lives long enough," put in his brother. "He'll see that I ain't a man to be bulldozed by no H. B. son-of-a-gun that

ever crawled, nor scared outer what he means doin' by all th' stinkin' red varmin Canada c'n spew up. We hev taken this yer grub ; an' we ain't took yet all we means t' take, an' don't ye forget it, mister. You watch me."

"I am. I can see you're bent on suicide."

"That needn't worry *yew*, my son," sneered Gardner. "I tell ye, we ain't finished yet. Have we, boys?"

The other men had come up, and Harry found himself facing a semi-circle of watching eyes.

"Have we finished yet, boys?" demanded the leader again in a rasping voice, looking from one to other of his supporters.

There was a ragged chorus of agreement, from the confident "You bet!" of Ed. Gardner to the nervous "Sure not!" from Simmins and his echo. The big Scandinavian youth nodded his head cheerfully, ejaculating "Dots so!" The half-breed said nothing, but the glance he gave at his leader and then at Harry was significant enough to the latter.

"And you—the six of you—think that, after robbing these Indians in this barefaced manner, you'll be allowed to get away with it," said Harry. "I tell you, you must be crazy."

"And who's goin' t' prevent us?" demanded the elder Gardner, with a threatening movement of his Winchester.

"Well, there are over forty full grown Indians——."

"Shucks!" Jesse interrupted contemptuously. "We saw t' day what they c'n do."

Harry looked at him long and steadily.

"You're satisfied with what you've seen to-day? And you call yourself an Indian fighter of experience! If I'd any sympathy to waste, I'd be feeling sorry for you."

Ed. Gardner burst into a hearty laugh.

"Keep all that truck for yerself, my son; ye'll be wantin' it," he suggested.

"You say you know Indians," continued Harry, ignoring the interruption; "and still you think that these men are going to allow you to carry off your robbery without——."

Jesse Gardner came a pace nearer, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"Now hold on right there," he shouted. "Yer usin' that word robbery too free, mister; and it ain't no healthy talk t' use. We took that blame grub, sure; we ain't finished takin', as I told ye. But it weren't robbery. It was restitootion. They destroyed our grub——."

"They did nothing of the kind," Harry interrupted quickly. "Your stores may have been burnt out all right, but the Indians had no hand in it."

"Yer a liar, mister."

Once again did Harry have to bite hard to keep back the hot reply, to clench his hands down on his thighs in the effort to control his impulse to take Gardner by the throat and choke from him an apology for this most detestable of all insults that can be offered an honourable man. It was a discipline his spirit resented.

"I repeat, Gardner, the Indians did not set fire to your stores," he returned firmly. "But I can tell you how the fire started. This fellow"—he indicated Oleson—"was responsible, though he probably isn't aware of it. I saw him fling down a burning match. It fell upon a tarpaulin, and no doubt started it smouldering; and the grass round about was dry as tinder. That's the truth of your fire."

"An' ye were there 'n' saw all this an' didn't warn no one?"

"I was a mile away."

The big Swede's eyes opened widely; but he was slow of tongue, and before he could get out a word Gardner was speaking.

"An' you c'd see——" he began.

"With field-glasses."

And with that Harry suddenly jammed his heels into the pony's flanks, laid on sharply with his quirt, and was beyond the reach of the disorganised party, Jesse Gardner stumbling and falling as he jumped aside to avoid being struck by the pony's shoulder. Without a glance behind he headed for the Indian village.

CHAPTER X

THE WAY OUT

Not having had undue hopes, his failure provided Harry Revell with no serious disappointment. He had had little confidence in a successful outcome of his mission, and it was with no feeling of failure or mortification that he took the trail from the Cree village back to the fort.

With more conceit in his make-up, he would have felt aggrieved and depressed because he had not been able to convince or persuade Big Elk and his counsellors that their intention to avenge the injury done them was disastrous, an adding of wrong to wrong. But he did not suffer from that form of mental blindness—which is self-confidence run to seed and not to be depended upon ; on the contrary, nature had endowed him with more than an average share of what, out on the plains, is called horse sense. Therefore, he was not suffering from that painful feeling of humiliation which weakens and unnerves the conceited man when he has to face the realisation that he is not so strong or so clever as he had believed himself.

To convince the angry individual that two wrongs do not make one right is a difficult business, generally a hopeless one, and Harry had found the Indians very angry indeed.

He was not many minutes behind The Rabbit

and his party in reaching the encampment, but every man, woman and child had become aware of what had happened, and dark and hostile were the glances that fell upon the lad as he rode up to the scattered tepees.

The squaws in charge of the pack train had at last ventured back and told their story. It had reached the chief; and he and the elders were deep in angry discussion of the misdeed against them when The Rabbit and Burnt Wood returned. Their absence had been noted, and they had been summoned forthwith to the council lodge. What they had to relate very naturally added to the growing anger.

Dismounting, Harry had made direct for the council lodge. Not a friendly eye had met his; not a word of greeting had been uttered. Even the face of Big Elk had been devoid of a suggestion of good feeling. He had sat down amid a complete silence. With true Indian sagacity, the Red men left the breaking of it to him.

He had spoken eloquently. He declared the act of the Gardner outfit a crime. He offered no excuse nor extenuation. He showed plainly that his sympathy was for the sufferers.

And the Indians heard him in stony silence. No man so much as glanced at him. No grunt of approval encouraged him when he had finished.

It was the same when he re-commenced with a reprobation of the foolish conduct of the headstrong young bucks. The copper-coloured

faces turned bleakly towards the open space around which all were seated gave no sign that a word had been heard. The black eyes remained without expression.

They were clearly resolved not even to admit discussion with him.

He made direct appeal to the chief himself. And Big Elk sat as grim and unmoved as the rest.

He made use of every argument against an appeal to force for the redress of the wrong committed against them ; and when he came to the end of his speech, he had the knowledge that he might just as usefully have been addressing empty walls.

At last Big Elk opened his lips.

"My brother has spoken. What will he do ? " he said.

He had asked a riddle for which Harry had not an answer. Harry knew it only too well.

What *could* he do ? What had he the means of doing ?

It was just what Harry had been asking himself.

"My brother does not answer," continued the chief. "Will he go himself and get back for us from the white men the food they have stolen ? "

There was a note of irony in his voice not to be mistaken.

"Will the white men give up their theft if our brother asks them ? " demanded Big Elk.

One grim face relaxed its impassiveness. There was a scornful grunt.

As he put the question, for the first time Big Elk looked squarely at Harry. The chief waited. Then—

“Will my brother go to the white men and *take* from them the goods they have stolen that we may have again what is ours?” he asked softly.

He paused again—for a longer period.

“Again my brother does not answer,” he continued impressively. “Has he not the words? How then does he believe our goods shall come back to us?”

This time, it was not one but half a dozen of the listeners that grunted. Faces were lifted and gloomy eyes turned questioningly upon Harry. He had the feeling that he was losing ground.

“Chief,” he said, rising to his feet; “you have spoken wisely. The white men are six; I am but one. I cannot compel them to give up what they have stolen; they will not if I ask them. What then remains? To steal is to do wrong; those who steal will be punished, whether they be Red men or white men. If they persist in their wrong-doing, these white men know that they will be punished. But to kill is a worse crime even than stealing. If you kill these men in taking from them your goods, how then shall you escape being punished? Who is it punishes those who do evil? The Police. You know them. That the Police make no difference between the white man and the Red man I have no need

to tell you. Let it be then for the Police to punish these white men who have robbed you, but beware that you do anything wrong so that the Police shall find it necessary to punish you also. I spoke but now to your young men, and they listened, and, knowing that it was wrong they had intended, they returned home. Surely you to whom I speak now, who are not young, but have wisdom, will not act more foolishly than the young men! Let not yourselves be carried away by anger. It is not always the bravest man who is quickest to strike. Have patience, I counsel you, and leave the punishment of these white men to those whose duty it is to punish the evil-doers. So shall you prove your wisdom and your bravery, and no harm shall befall you."

He sat down, but a chilly silence followed that held no encouragement.

"My brother's mouth is full of wisdom although his years are not many," observed Big Elk in a mechanical voice.

And then a lesser chief began to speak, with rapidity and violence. Where were the Police? he asked. How should the Police know of the robbery? And if they did, would the white men stay where they were until the Police came to them? There was no quarrel with the white man of the Company, but was it *he* who had been robbed? He counselled patience: had he suffered injury? Not with patience and submission had their fathers met such injury. They—the Indians—were more than

forty warriors, the white men but six, and it was not possible that six could prevail against so many. The young white man (Harry) had said that the robbers should be punished—what more fitting than that those who had been robbed should inflict the punishment?

“And if the Police come,” concluded the chief vehemently; “are there not the great plains wherein the Police cannot follow us? If we sit down quietly under this shame, it is to tell the white men that they may do with us as they will. Having robbed us of so much, will they not come again and rob us still further? Was ever the white man satisfied?”

He sat down; and the flashing eyes, the animation that suddenly lightened the dark faces about him, told Harry plainly enough with what favour the speech of Old Man was received.

Without further words, he rose and went from the lodge.

But content to allow matters to take their course Harry was not. Something must be done, as much to save the Indians from the consequences of their intended folly as the Gardner outfit from losing their lives.

But what to do?

Should he go down again to Gardner and offer him the protection of the fort? And have the trouble for reward! The man was headstrong, and a fool.

Should he send McCraw down to Fort Selkirk,

to ask for assistance? The half-breed was old, but still he was tough, and an expert in a canoe; he could cover the distance inside a week. Yes, and long before assistance could arrive, the Indians would have carried out their revenge and moved off, bag and baggage, into the remoteness of the wilds.

Cudgel his brains as he might, Harry could discover no satisfactory solution to his problem.

While eating supper, it occurred to him that the goldseekers themselves might provide the solution by a hurried get-away with their stolen goods before the Crees should make a move. Almost he hoped they would do so. It would be a relief, anyway, to know that such was their intention, and a strong desire to find out came to him.

Finishing his meal in a hurry, he told McCraw he was going out of the fort, armed himself with a revolver, and made for the river. He would just paddle up to the landing, and, if the Gardner outfit was preparing for an early remove, he would not be able to miss the signs. Half an hour, forty minutes at the most, would give him the information he wanted and hoped for.

When he actually returned there was that faint break in eastern gloom telling him of the near approach of dawn. His flesh was torn, sodden with water, and chilled with cold. He panted heavily as he emerged upon the landing place below the fort, and his stumbling limbs had barely sufficient strength to take him to the house.

Oh yes, he had learned what he wanted, and more beside. He had discovered, without having been himself observed, he believed, that the Indians had a scout hidden by the river bank between the fort and the camp of the gold-seekers.

He had discovered that two more scouts were posted along the river above the camp. Clever as the Red man is at hiding himself, none of the three had been prudent enough to conceal himself from observation from the river side of his lurking place.

It was clear that the possibility of the Gardner party making a get-away had occurred to the Indians also, and Big Elk had arranged for early knowledge of the attempt.

And Gardner had that intention. Harry had found one of the scows already in the water, and, completely concealed amid the dense shadow of the bank, had waited, listening to the sounds that evidenced beyond all error the strenuous efforts being made to launch the second.

Then he had landed, his curiosity developed in another direction, and he had had good cause to bless his skill in woodcraft that had enabled him to evade and creep through the cordon of Red men drawn about the camp. Once he had almost betrayed himself. Flat on his stomach, his straining eyes had caught for an instant the outline of the head of a warrior as he slowly drew himself from his concealment amid the grass, to catch a possible glimpse of the creature whose barely audible, stealthy movement had

betrayed it to his acute ears. When at last Harry had dared to move again, he carried through successfully a piece of snaking upon which the most accomplished Indian scout would have complimented him.

A half-mile farther he had come upon another discovery. It was that the Klondikers, apprehensive of an attack from their enemies, had taken the precaution to put out a sentry. Harry had located him in one of the rifle pits. He judged the man to be either Simmins or Martin, for it was the faint scent of burning tobacco had given him knowledge of the hidden watcher, unable to withstand the temptation of a cigarette to while away the tedium of his vigil. The half-breed would have known better than to smoke; and the Norwegian youth's muscular strength would be better employed in the scow launching and the packing of the stores.

The return to where he had left the canoe had occupied him a long time; so long that, failing to hit the spot where the craft had been hid up, rather than risk almost certain discovery by continuing the search, he had taken to the water, to swim down to the fort landing.

It was a gloomy satisfaction resulting from his adventurous trip; for there stood revealed the settled resolution of the Crees to exact a bitter vengeance for the injury they had suffered. The manner in which it was to be accomplished Harry could guess. No attack would be made upon the camp. There would be no attempt

to prevent the white men from getting away ; but so soon as the scows were fairly in the river, the crews would become easy targets for the Indian marksmen in hiding upon the bank.

He was not feeling so satisfied that Gardner's quick departure was the solution to the problem. Indeed, so evident did it become to him that it was not, that he made up his mind to put into execution an idea that had come to him during the night.

How he would justify himself to the Company later he did not know. He could find full exoneration, believing that the expenditure of a few thousand dollars was a small price to pay for the saving of a single human life, not to speak of preventing the punishment that would inevitably fall upon the Indian tribe were its bloodthirsty intentions unhindered. But the Chief Factor probably would have different ideas.

For his idea was no less than to go to Big Elk and offer to replace from the fort's stores the food stolen, if the chief would guarantee the abandonment of all intentions of revenge upon the Gardner outfit. He wondered why he had not thought of it before.

So sure was he that it was the right thing to do ; so fearful that he had thought of it too late ; that, dog-tired as he was, he waited for no more than a change of garments and a hasty snack of food before hurrying to the Indian village to find the chief and put the proposition to him.

Big Elk manifested no surprise at the earliness of the visit. Courteously he bade Harry enter his tepee and sit down, and with impassive face he listened to the suggestion.

"My white brother speaks well and with a good heart," he said quietly, when Harry had finished. "He speaks as one who wishes well to the Indian; and I and my people have ever believed that he speaks as one with but a single voice. Let my brother speak again, but to a full council lodge."

An hour later, Harry was treading the trail back to the fort with weary feet, but a heart lighter than it had been since Donald Fraser had gone away. He had succeeded; and success was full compensation for the physical pain and weariness that made every step a misery.

In the council lodge but a single voice, that of the belligerent chieftain, Old Man, had been raised against the acceptance of his proposal; and after a speech from Big Elk, which followed the lad's earnest address, Old Man had deemed it wisdom to say no more. Convinced at last that their loss would be made good, assured by Harry that the stores should be handed over to them that day, did they so choose, every Indian within the lodge pledged his word that no further hostile steps would be taken against the goldseekers.

"The heart of our white brother is good," declared Big Elk with dignity. "Therefore my people believe him that he wishes well to us. He is ready to protect us as the prairie hen

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is to protect her young brood. We pray that the Great Spirit will be good to him. Because of his goodness, we will forget the injury and shame that the wicked white men have put upon us. Between us and them shall be peace, because of our brother's truth and justice. We now can sleep in our tents without fear."

CHAPTER XI

THE ATTACK ON THE FORT

The last of the long string of loaded ponies was hustled into movement; the rearguard of the well-armed convoy (no chances were being taken this time) nodded and bade Harry "Good-bye." With a final glance around the almost emptied storehouse, he went outside, slammed the heavy door, and turned the big key in the padlock.

Say, but he was glad to finish! The hour was getting late, and he was dog-weary. Supper and bed forthwith was his intention.

His exertions of the night before; the want of sleep; the heavy toil of the day in dealing singlehanded (for some reason of his own, McCraw had not been within the fort) with the transfer of nearly three tons of stores to the Indians (who had taken him at his word), all combined to make Harry look forward to a long night's rest with some impatience. McCraw, appearing as soon as he entered the house, told him supper was ready.

"Guess I'll get off to sleep right away," Harry said, dropping into a chair.

But as though not having heard him, the old man brought in a meal and put it in front of him, and Harry fell to, but without interest.

"White men in camp by river bad men," McCraw announced, bringing in a jug of coffee and setting it down.

Harry nodded. He wasn't needing any instruction in that matter. Besides, he did not feel like conversation.

But the old half-breed had discovered a violent inclination towards conversation, and was not to be discouraged.

"They give trouble by-'n'-by," he declared oracularly.

They had given more than enough already. The lad hoped he had seen the finish of them—and said so, sleepily. His eating was perfunctory; he could barely keep his eyes open.

"No; not gone yet," McCraw said. "Stay in camp. Guess they up to no good." He was wandering aimlessly about the room, fumbling with his unlighted pipe. "They're worth watching, sure."

"Ye-es; worth—watching," assented Harry, a prolonged pause between the words. "Been watching."

His chin dropped on his breast; his eyes closed. He was fast asleep, forehead supported by his hands.

But McCraw, unsuspecting, went on talking. He had been watching the Klondikers, and he could not tell what they meant doing. They had ponies in their camp. Their scows were in the water and loaded. He wondered for what they were waiting. He had quite a deal to say and, like most old men, was not distressed by keeping up a wholly one-sided conversation. By falling asleep at that moment, Harry missed a whole lot of useful information.

Suddenly, with a jerk, he woke.

"Yes, I've been watching them," he said, taking up the talking just where he had left off; and John, having no notion he had been asleep for the past five minutes, accepted the statement as an intimation that his master was thoroughly well-informed upon the puzzling activities of the Klondikers.

But it was not; which explains why Harry tumbled into his bed and a glorious sleep that prolonged itself to a full sixteen hours, a deep, undreaming unconsciousness from which he awoke with mind refreshed and undisturbed and muscles from which all soreness had vanished.

Maybe it was all^{er} for the best. Certainly he would not have slumbered as he did had he understood from McCraw that the enmity between the Indians and Gardner's outfit had been aggravated—that while he was dealing with the Indians in the storehouse, the white and the Red men had come into further collision; that blood had actually been spilled.

It was the disagreeable fact, however.

Intent upon carrying out his plan, Jesse Gardner and another man had gone out during the forenoon to capture a number of the pack ponies brought in loaded with the stolen food, which, scared by the shooting, had promptly taken to their heels and scattered when The Rabbit and his party had begun their ill-advised charge upon the rifle pits. The ponies had seen no reason for returning to the village, and

Gardner had sallied out to bring them in, they being necessary for the conveyance of the stores he had promised himself he was going to obtain from Harry Revell.

A number had been rounded up, when half a dozen young Indians had arrived on the scene and demanded their property. From angry words the rival claimants had speedily passed to blows. The bucks had drawn their knives, the white men their revolvers. Three of the former had been badly wounded, and Gardner had carried off in triumph the ponies he required.

This tragic narrative by the old half-breed Harry had wholly missed. So that when John ultimately aroused him with the information that "they were coming," and that it would be as well for him to wake up if he didn't want his throat cut without knowing it, his first conclusion was that the old man had taken sudden leave of his senses. His next, John being more emphatic, was that the Indians had proved treacherous.

"Three of 'em, an' a hull string of ponies. They sure bad men and mean kill us," McCraw asserted with conviction.

Inside thirty seconds, Harry was into his boots and coat, had grabbed his rifle and filled a pocket with cartridges, and was looking cautiously from the house doorway.

He saw them right enough—three mounted men driving a string of ponies towards the fort, and not a couple of hundred yards away.

But it was with a big feeling of relief he recognised the riders—not Indians, but Jesse Gardner, with the big Swede and the half-breed at the tail of the procession. All carried rifles.

Perfectly self-possessed and confident, Gardner held on until within half pistol-shot of the storehouse, halted the ponies, and, leaving them in the care of Oleson, strolled unconcernedly towards the house, from which Harry had not moved. Whatever Gardner's intentions, he would not be first to show evidence of hostility.

"Howdy," observed Gardner carelessly. "We come along for that grub yer goin' to give us."

Harry regarded him almost with admiration. The fellow's nerve was perfect. There was nothing to suggest that his intentions were not of the friendliest.

"What grub's that?" Harry returned, falling into Gardner's humour.

"What I talked about a while ago; you ain't forgot. Th' shortage ain't so bad as it was, I'm mighty pleased t' say."—Gardner grinned faintly—"but we're still shy a couple o' thousand pounds 'r so, so jus' nachally I comes along to you for it."

"Forgetting what I told you when you spoke about it before?" said Harry, still determined to keep up the pretence of good feeling.

"Oh say, kid, but ye was only foolin'," laughed Gardner. "Come along, kid, 'n' get a move on for yer store. Guess we wasted

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too much time araound here already. Produce yer key, kid ; f'r I see yer keeps th' shanty fastened up. 'Fraid o' them Indian thieves, hey ? "

Still Harry kept a check on his temper, although the man's easy assumption that he had only to command to be obeyed at once was more than aggravating. Harry shook his head.

" Come to the wrong place, my man," he replied. " There's no grub in the store for you."

The insolent pretence of geniality died out of the goldseeker's face, leaving it hard and grim ; a ferocious expression crept into his cold eyes which, for half a minute, he held piercingly on Harry's. Then—

" Quit foolin', kid," he said threateningly, but without excitement. " Come 'n' find that grub."

" I have already told you," Harry answered steadily.

He was neither to be stared down nor intimidated ; Gardner could read no wavering in his face. Yet he could not bring himself to believe in the lad's defiance.

" You'll think again, kid—an' different," he said, thrusting his jaw forward. " I don't want'er spile ye."

" You've had my answer," returned Harry.

" Then by thunder ! here's mine," cried the other, his voice rising to a shout.

And he threw his Winchester to his shoulder.

" Just you——."

His was the quickness of anger, yet it lagged behind the swift-moving of the lad's brain and muscles. A wolverine could not have jumped more nimbly; a professional boxer could not have struck with greater rapidity and accuracy. With his left arm Harry struck aside the rifle barrel, and his right fist catching Gardner squarely on the chin, shot him down in his tracks as though he had been clubbed. Before the man had fairly realised what was happening, the rifle was wrenched from his grip and slung thirty feet to the left, and Harry, leaping back to the doorway, had snatched at his own Winchester and held Gardner covered.

"You would have it," cried the lad, a-quiver with excitement. "Get up! get——."

There was a sharp, cracking report, and a bullet flew over Harry's head within the house. Charley, the half-breed, who had stayed half-way between the store and the house, had seen his leader knocked down, and fired instantly. He was a quick shot, if not an accurate one, for before Harry, who had forgotten his existence, had realised that he was the mark and could withdraw, he fired again, the bullet sinking into the stout jamb of the door, behind which the lad found protection.

In an instant Jesse Gardner was on his feet and running to recover his own weapon. Then he darted round the rear of the house and ran to rejoin his companions.

"You spoke up just in time," he told the half-breed. "That son-of-a-gun 'd fairly gotten

th' drop on me. But I'll learn him that he can't fool with Jesse Gardner ; no, nor lay his hands on me neither," and his own fingers went up tenderly to his chin. " I give him his chance, 'n' he won't take it. We goin' t' bust in this yer store 'n' help ourselves. Ole 'n' me 'll tend to that. You, Charley, keep outside 'n' plug th' son-of-a-gun good 'n' quick soon 's he shows his head outer his door. He can't draw a bead on us without comin' 'bout 'n' showin' himself plain t' ye. Get me ? "

The half-breed nodded, and, with much composure, stretched himself on the ground behind one angle of a snake fence enclosing a strip of garden ground, where Donald Fraser had found much healthy pleasure and won some success in the cultivation of the hardy kale of his native land, potatoes, onions, rhubarb, and other garden truck, and that in spite of the fact that a man with a spade would not have had to work until tired before meeting soil in a permanently frozen condition.

From his position he commanded a clear view of the door of the dwelling-house ; and, both house and store facing in the same direction, it was impossible for Harry to venture from the doorway and attempt interference with those about to rifle the store without exposing himself to the certainty of a bullet from a marksman who would have no need to hurry over his aim, and who knew himself invisible forty yards distant for so long as he remained prone.

It was plain murder that he contemplated ; but he felt no compunction as he drew the rifle butt into his shoulder and looked along the barrel for the appearance of his victim.

A brief examination of the big padlock on the store door had shown Gardner that attempt to force it would be futile ; some other way of breaking in would have to be adopted. The solid shutters covering the window openings promised nothing, they being too high up to be dealt with effectively.

"Here, you Dutchy," he shouted to the stolid young Swede. "Come along ; we'll have t' bust her open. Why in thunder didn't ye bring an axe along ? We'll have t' heft that stick between us," and he indicated a long and stout spruce log lying at hand.

"Ol right," grinned Oleson.

And getting his huge hands under one end of the tree trunk, he raised it as easily as though it had been a length of scantling.

"Take other end ; we fix her ol right," he said cheerfully.

With some difficulty Gardner lifted his end ; for a few seconds they stood, steadying themselves ; then they stumbled forward, and with a swing dashed one end of the long trunk against the solid door.

The heavy timbers shook and creaked, but without indication of giving.

"Take us th' hull night," growled Gardner, as they prepared for a second assault.

But before the second stroke fell a rifle

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cracked, and Gardner's hat went spinning, the crown pierced by a bullet.

With a shout of angry surprise, Gardner dropped his end and flopped on the grass.

"Get down, ye fool!" he cried to the gaping Oleson, who was staring about him, still grasping the trunk. "Don't ye know when ye're bein' shot at?"

"Who vos shootin'?" enquired the giant, complacently sitting down.

But the leader had no use for foolish questions just then—and it was a foolish question, since no one could be shooting at them except the kid at the fort; and how in thunder did he come to be doing that, when Charley the half-breed was lying out there just to prevent him doing that very thing? He'd have to leave the shelter of the house to fire; had that breed fallen asleep, that he hadn't plugged the kid soon as he showed himself?

After waiting an interval, Gardner hailed Charley.

"Hey there, Charley; where that shot come from?" he shouted.

"Dunno!"

Gardner waited a while longer, then prodded Oleson.

"Get up. We'll have another try."

Up went the Swede's great bulk readily enough; Gardner followed. Once more they lifted the spruce trunk, and again a rifle cracked. This time it was Oleson's hat that went flying. Again the pair went to the ground, Gardner cursing volubly.

Still there was not the answering shot expected from Charley.

Dragging himself on his stomach, Gardner reached the half-breed.

"Why in thunder ain't you pluggin' that son-of-a-gun?" he demanded furiously.

"Don't see, can't shoot," was the curt answer.

"You go swing that log with Dutchy; I'll stay here," ordered Gardner, and he glued his eyes upon the doorway of the dwelling-house.

The minutes went by, and he would have sworn that not even a shadow passed across the blank opening on which his gaze was fixed. For all that, a sudden crisp explosion broke the silence, and was immediately followed by a sharp yell behind him.

"Th' tricky swine!" he ejaculated; and he began to snake back to where his companions were crouching in front of the store.

He had seen, as had Charley, a tiny puff of smoke ascending from the house, but, quicker witted than the half-breed, had guessed the stratagem Harry was employing.

"What's the damage?" he asked as he joined them.

The half-breed silently pointed to a fresh perforation in his old felt hat, but the young Swede, whose careless good humour had wholly departed, began to make voluble protest against staying in a place where invisible marksmen, probably evil spirits, played cruelly with them as a preliminary to taking their lives.

"Aw, shut yer head!" Gardner cut him

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short. "It ain't no spirit proposition we're up against here, but a real live kid with a good eye 'n' a shootin' iron. You, Dutchy, yer blame strong. Think ye c'n swing that stick all on yer own?"

"Ah t'ink so, mebbe."

"Right. Then take her round to th' end of th' store 'n' bust yer way in somehow. Hitch them ponies to a log end 'n' get her started if ye like. But get inside. Th' feller with th' gun can't reach ye there. Skip lively, my son. We ain't here for keeps. Charley, you 'n' me 'll go look out. We'll get that kid busy."

They disappeared; and Oleson, for once fully exerting the immense strength with which he had been gifted, began to assault the end wall of the store with mighty blows and concussions that shook the building from foundations to eaves, and the booming of which reached easily to Harry Revell in his place of concealment, bringing consternation to his heart.

He realised his utter helplessness. Fine shot as he was, his rifle was useless against one protected from its bullets by the double wall of the store. And he could expect no help. McCraw was probably in hiding. He had seen nothing of the old man since his dash to the door to confront Gardner.

Alive to the latter's intentions, having escaped the half-breed's bullet, he had retreated to his sleeping room, leaving the door open by

intention. From the sleeping room a short ladder led to a trap opening upon the sloping roof of the house. Through this he had hauled himself without being observed. Asprawl there, concealed by a wide, squat, square-built chimney over the fireplace in the kitchen, erected by some former trader at the post who had not been content with the customary stove, he was able to command a view of the front of the store, and materially interrupt the attempts to smash down the door.

It would have been as easy to put bullets through the heads of the three desperadoes as to perforate their headgear, but to such killing Harry could not bring himself, even in defence of the property of the Company. Only as a last resort, and in actual defence of his life, was the shedding of blood possible.

But this latest move by Gardner had baffled him.

He was quickly to learn that the American was not satisfied simply to prevent his interference.

From close beside a corner of the garden fence a rifle went off, and he heard the bullet chip against the mud-and-stone chimney. Almost immediately after came another explosion, this time on the other side of him, and he felt the thud of the bullet in the timbers just below him. Quickly followed more shots, scattering over him chips of stone and slivers of wood. His position on the roof was become untenable.

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Yet for a while he held to it obstinately, doing some shooting himself, aiming below and to the rear of the little jets and puffs of pale smoke that spurted up from the grass on either hand ; for even his sharp sight could detect no more definite indication of his hidden enemies.

And all the while he was hearing the dull thudding of timber smashing against timber, as the big Swede plied his mighty blows.

The tables had been turned on him with a vengeance.

CHAPTER XII

TIME TO GO

With no more damage than a deep snick in his cheek where a flying fragment of stone had struck him, Harry contrived to wriggle feet foremost to the trap and shove himself through the opening. But he was not feeling as thankful as he doubtless should have been ; for his own safety was not giving him a tithe of the worry that the imminent looting of the store occasioned.

Yet he did not see how he was to prevent it happening. Even if he were successful in making a break from the fort and putting the Swede out of action he would accomplish little. Out in the open, Gardner and the other fellow would quickly make short work of him ; after which the plundering of the store would go on at the victors' leisure.

It was no consolation to him that, where he was, he was in comparative safety. Gardner would not waste lead pumping it into the ten-inch wooden walls in the hope that a chance bullet might find a billet in him. They did not particularly want to kill him. To bottle him up while they obtained what they wanted would suit their purpose, and that they had succeeded in doing. They had bested him to rights, and the anger this knowledge provoked him to kept urging him to throw prudence and

safety to the winds, to make an attempt at reaching the store and driving the third man hence, and take his chance as to what followed.

At least, he would be doing his duty in protecting the property of his employers; and it had not been the habit of the servants of the Company to consider their own interests, their lives even, against their duty. Was he to be the first to break the long and glorious tradition of loyalty and service that had been the outstanding feature of the Hudson Bay Company?

Would Fraser have thought of his own safety? Would he have hidden himself snugly in the house and left the Company's goods to the mercy of a band of ruffians, red or white?

Would his soldier-father in England, crippled for life by a Pathan knife while holding an outpost on the north-west Indian frontier against a band of raiding tribesmen, be pleased when he learned that his son had preferred the preservation of his own safety to accepting the consequences of doing his plain duty?

Harry Revell started and shook himself. His father should never hear *that* account of him.

Going to the bed, he picked up and got into his jacket, filled the pockets with cartridges, and buckled a .38 calibre revolver to his belt. He would slip out by the door from the kitchen. If he were quick, he would be able to gain the shelter of the near-by wood pile without being observed and shot at by the watcher on that side of the house. Thence he could depend

upon his training and craft to reach the store, creeping through the abundant grass.

But first he found a broom, hung on one end an old coat and on top of that placed a hat, and carried the contraption to the outer door. There, hidden by the woodwork, he arranged to give the impression of a man peeping around the door jamb. It was a simple device, but it might amuse and occupy Gardner's attention for a brief while.

Opening the door from the kitchen, stooping low, Harry made a dart for the great stack of logs twenty feet away. Behind it he dropped, his heart thumping more than a little. So far, so good; he had not been seen.

Then began a painfully slow and careful squirming towards the store, a passage worse even than his nocturnal crawl through the cordon of Cree scouts, for there was no friendly darkness to hide the agitation of the thickly bunched grass and waving of the light spearheads caused by the passage of his body, careful though he was. With every foot covered he expected to hear the discharge of a rifle, to feel the impact of a bullet. Brain, muscle, and nerve were keyed up to the most acute tension.

But the minutes passed, and with each the great bulk of the store, when he dared lift his eyes to it, grew still more large; the more loudly in his ears sounded the thudding and crashing of meeting timbers on the far side as Oleson tirelessly continued at his work.

At last Harry was within an easy biscuit

toss of the timber walls, and for a few seconds he rested. Closer he would not go, but continued in a parallel track.

Another five minutes, and he was abreast of the angle, and with the big Swede in full view.

Sleeves rolled high above a pair of brown, hugely muscled arms, Oleson heaved the great spruce log upright in the air and balanced it in his enormous paws, much after the fashion of a Highland Scot playing at the caber tossing. A pause; then, with a mighty heave, he launched the trunk end on against the wall, unaware of the watcher of his feat of strength.

"Ha!" he grunted; and there was a violent crash.

Then an explosion drowned the booming of the trembling wall, and Oleson jumped six feet to one side, eyes wide open and mouth agape, with astonishment rather than fear, as a bullet stirred the thick mass of yellow hair upon the nape of his neck.

Stock still he stood, giving Harry time for a second shot that went whistling across the front of his face.

It was enough for Oleson, who let out a fear-stricken bellow and began to run with ponderous swiftness towards the ponies.

Rising to his knees, Harry sent a third bullet to expedite his departure.

As he looked up from the shot, he had a view of the upper part of the man and the head of a horse moving rapidly along the trail leading to the fort. He had a hand to his

mouth, and was shouting as one possessed—a white man, Harry quickly determined.

"Another of the crowd," the lad mentally decided.

But his attention was immediately drawn from the newcomer by a dull and continuous thudding sound that could mean nothing but the rapid approach of a number of mounted men.

Things were happening quickly. The shouting grew nearer and more distinct, so that Harry could distinguish words of warning. There was an answering shout or so. Standing upright, he glanced past the store to see Jesse Gardner running at top speed for the ponies. A few seconds later, the half-breed came within view. Oleson was already mounted and on the move, hitting the high places for the camp.

Both Gardner and Charley must have seen Harry, for he made no effort to escape observation, but neither paid him the slightest attention. The mounted men hastening to the fort could be none other than Indians, and the Klondikers were obviously anxious to remove themselves ere the Red men arrived.

"Thank Heaven!" the lad exclaimed.

The coming of the Indians, who in another couple of minutes were pulling up their ponies outside the store, had saved him.

The reason for their appearance he detected later in the person of old John McCraw, dismounting stiffly and coming towards him.

"Reckon we not too late," said the old man.

And Harry took his hand and gripped it hard.

"Reckon not, John. I owe you one for this," was all he said.

Neither the Scottish nor the Indian blood in the old man would have been gratified by a more emotional display of feeling.

Then Harry turned to greet Big Elk, to thank him for his welcome arrival.

"It is well, my brother," the chief said gravely. "The Indian has no need of thanks from his white brother who has taken care that neither the cold nor the hunger of winter shall afflict him. My people and I are glad that we might do this thing for one into whose heart the Great Spirit has given a pity for his children. Is my brother hurt?"

"Sound as a bell; though how much longer I'd have stayed so but for your coming I wouldn't like to say," returned Harry.

"Then my people will depart," said the chief; "we have work to do."

And Harry had the good manners not to be curious what that work might be.

Late that evening, however, he regretted his want of curiosity; for from McCraw he learned that the Crees had ridden direct for Gardner's camp, where White and Red had engaged in serious conflict.

Rendered furious by the theft of their ponies, and enraged beyond all restraint by the wounding of the three young men, one of whom had died as he was brought into the village, the Indians

had demanded of their chief vengeance on the goldseekers. And Big Elk, no less incensed by this further act of hostility, had made no attempt to hold them in check.

True, his promise had been given to Harry to give up all thought of retaliation, but that was in respect of injuries past; the Indian mind did not conceive itself bound to submit to restriction in the matter of this fresh injury. A Red man's life had been taken; not to avenge the killing would have been a confession of cowardice no Indian chief's authority over his tribe could have sustained.

It was on his way to the river that Big Elk had been met by John McCraw, and, learning what was happening at the fort, had turned aside to the trader's assistance.

The attack on the goldseekers' camp had been beaten off; several of the Indians had received wounds, and two of the white men were believed hurt. But Big Elk had not been content with the land attack. Two Indians had swum silently down with the stream and succeeded in damaging one scow so badly that she had gone to the bottom with all the stores packed aboard. A brave had been shot dead while at work with his knife on the second scow, from which Gardner had succeeded in removing the bulk of the food before she, too, had vanished under the water.

That evening Harry debated long over what he should do. To sit idly watching while Red and White fought out their quarrel, by open

attack or obscure murder, was wholly out of the question. Yet he knew himself unable to put an end to such a state of things, a state that could not be allowed to continue. The matter had grown too big for him to handle; it was beyond his reach; the condition was such that only the recognised authorities could deal with it. The Police must be informed. Theirs was the authority and theirs the power; and the sooner both were in operation the better.

Yes; the Police must know. And who was there to inform them?

Himself.

There was none other. To send McCraw, an old man, on the journey through an unexplored country for three hundred miles, was out of the question. There had been severe frosts every night of late; winter might fall upon the land at any moment. To-night it was possible to go to bed with the scent of the drying grasses of the plains in one's nostrils. To-morrow one might waken to find the land under a mantle of ever-thickening snow.

To send out McCraw would be equivalent to murder. It was not to be done.

But McCraw could take charge of the post. The Indians could be relied upon to protect it against a further assault from the Klondikers, desperate as the latter would now of necessity be.

It was an evil, but its alternative was a still worse evil. If his decision was wrong; if his judgment was at fault, and later he would be unable to justify his act before the

Chief Factor—well, on himself alone would the penalty fall.

War between the Indian tribe and the Gardner outfit could not be permitted to go on unchecked ; neither might McCraw be used to bring the Police into action.

One further effort Harry did attempt. The morning after, he went to Big Elk and spoke, begging for the Indians' sake that no act of hostility should come from his people. But Big Elk was adamant.

"My brother means well ; his heart is good," he made answer. "But this is Indian matter, not my brother's."

And Harry realised it was useless to say more.

CHAPTER XIII

THE POLICE

John McCraw received the news of Harry's decision and his own novel responsibility with characteristic stolidity. He raised no doubts, made no comments, and asked but one question.

"When you come back, eh?"

"I shall know that when I'm here," Harry answered him. "Ten days, maybe longer. But you'll be all right, eh? I don't just know what those fellows by the river will be doing now their boats are finished. They won't make the Yukon this trip, I guess. But they won't trouble you, I'm thinking. And if they should, send a hurry call to Big Elk and he'll come along. You'll find a few rockets. Better keep them in the house. But I guess they'll be willing to leave you alone."

The half-breed nodded. Like his kind, he had not a vivid imagination, and was not given to worrying over events that had not happened.

"You go now?"

"Soon as you've fixed up a square meal."

While the food was cooking Harry made his preparations. For riding, he made choice of Skookum, a dark sorrel pony, not the speediest of the string, but the toughest, as he had proved more than once. Skookum was a rough, untidy-looking animal in whose red eyes was an expression that a timid rider would have accepted

as sufficient reason for leaving him severely alone. One finds shirkers and cowards amongst horses much as they are to be found amongst men, the real grit likewise; and Harry had not yet met with the day's work hard enough or long enough to weaken Skookum's big heart.

"Steady there, steady! you old son-of-a-gun, you!" expostulated Harry tenderly, as the cayuse made frantic efforts to chew the hand trying to bit him. "You'll be tame enough, I'll bet, before you're through with this trip. It's work, my son, W-O-R-K, ahead of you, and don't you forget it."

Every bit of leather he looked over with care. Grub for ten days—flour, bacon, beans, tea and sugar—he stowed in a couple of stout bags. Matches he did not forget, these being rather more precious even than food to the rider going a journey across the nor'-west plains, especially in winter in the Mackenzie Basin, where, without much warning, the thermometer will play fantastic tricks that the unacquainted will roundly declare to be wildly improbable.

"If it's a choice between fire and grub, give me fire," says the experienced plainsman; and you can bet he knows what he is talking about.

For warmth at night Harry was relying upon three four-point H. B. white blankets; and, as an additional heat conserver, he dragged on over his ordinary trousers a pair of heavy leather shaps.

John McCraw ferried him across the broad

river, finding nothing to say as he pulled on the sweeps. Phlegmatic, puffing at his inseparable pipe, the half-breed waited until the lad had mounted before re-entering the boat.

"Well, so long," said Harry. "Be back as soon as I can."

John nodded. "Good-bye," he said.

That was all. But both were well aware that it was nothing better than an even chance they ever saw each other again.

Before him was a journey that an older traveller might well have looked forward to with not a little misgiving, but Harry was unconscious of any feeling of depression or uncertainty as he set Skookum's ugly head towards the south-east. Round about a couple of hundred miles ahead of him, somewhere lay the North West Mounted Police post with its two or three troopers, who represented constituted authority and legal power throughout a few hundreds of square miles. What lay in between himself and that post he could do little more than guess at. The truth he was going to find out. All he knew was that, somehow or other, he just had to find that post—a mere speck in an unknown land of forest, meadow, and water. If he failed to find it at once, then he would have to go on searching until it was found.

For the search, he would have only himself to rely upon. There was a rough map of the country at the fort, and he had looked it over; but it had not told him much. It could hardly

tell him more, for the man who had made it out had done so largely from his own inner consciousness, aided by scraps of information of Indian origin—not to be accepted as trustworthy.

The pretty stories concerning the Red man told by the earlier writers notwithstanding, it is a melancholy fact that the casual Indian cannot and does not retain in his memory an exact and photographic plan of a region he has once passed through.

The Red man's topographical information is not wholly reliable. Whether this is the result of ignorance or intention to mislead the theorist may be left to argue. The practical plainsman hasn't a doubt. He has had opportunity of studying the Indian at first hand.

It was on his compass and his frontiersman's craft that Harry Revell was chiefly relying to get over those two hundred odd miles and find the police post in the shortest possible time. Any actual trail, he was well aware, did not exist. An Indian track was possible, but, if followed, might easily prove misleading.

From the river Harry walked Skookum for a good mile before setting him at a better pace. He had in his mind an average fifty miles a day, and he was horseman enough to be aware of the folly of rushing his mount at the commencement. Fifty miles a day may not sound a deal—a horse will do twice as much, and more, inside twenty-four hours if pushed, and not wanted for another week. But Harry

wanted Skookum, not for a day trip, but a certain ten days, and a daily average of fifty miles was all he could hope for. It might be an over-estimate, even for Skookum.

Harry knew, as many a man does not—even a horseman in a civilised land—that a horse's powers of endurance are a long way inferior to a man's.

He was stiff and inclined to saddle-soreness himself when he made camp the first evening on the side of a wooded knoll overlooking a small lake. Skookum did not exhibit any egregious liveliness when unsaddled and turned loose—hobbled against accident of straying.

With his axe Harry speedily cut down a couple of young trees, rustled dead wood, and quickly had a fire going. The air was thin and sharp. He foretold frost. Half a dozen rashers of bacon were quickly in the pan and diffusing a welcome aroma around. A few bannocks, of McCraw's making, he had carried along with him; and he heated them in the pan, bathed in the bacon fat. A mug of scalding tea completed his meal.

No smoker, he spent no time over a pipe before getting within his already spread-out blankets, with six inches of yielding boughs beneath him. Within five minutes he was soundly asleep, the fire good to last until he awakened next morning.

The white-coated embers and glowing log-end encouraged into a cheerful glow within ten minutes of arousing himself before the dawn

had well lightened the morrow's sky, Harry prepared breakfast—a replica of the overnight meal, with a few beans that had been cooking in the kettle while he slept. His limbs were still stiff, but he was aware that would wear off when he was in the saddle.

The meal finished, the fire was stamped out, Skookum brought in and saddled, gear collected and made fast, and the day's ride commenced.

Six hours of Skookum's easy, loping run, judiciously mixed with walking spells, and it was time for dinner. But it was easy riding country. Harry made no fire—he would not spend the time. Bacon, fried at breakfast, with cold bannock, the last of John's cooking, with water from a stream, made his meal. Then to saddle again.

Such was the day, and so for the four following, with such variations as the nature of the country demanded.

On the fourth day he was riding through a flattish, more open country, some of it almost marshy, with the brilliant flowers of the Indian paint-brush, the wild aster, in lovely pink and purple patches alternating, the patches of burnished gold showing where the golden rod still bloomed along the less moist stretches. The land was far less wooded; spruce had given way to white poplar, the trunks of which had the appearance of having been bleached. Towards the end of the day, this timber disappeared wholly, leaving bare prairie. It was a meagre fire Harry sat by that night,

with too much of flame and too little solid warmth.

He was looking anxiously about him when he broke camp next morning, and his eyes remained skinned as he directed Skookum's head a trifle more southerly. He had hopes of striking the police post that morning, although a wide swerve on either side of his general line had brought him no glimpse of any trail such as he would have expected to find if nearing the location of the post.

He could only hope he had not gone wrong. No sign of human being, white or red, had met his eyes since leaving McCraw. Of game he had had no more than an occasional glimpse. Yet he could not bring himself to believe he was far from his reckoning. The day before, he had skirted the shore of a large lake, taking the left hand rather than the right, and following the shining stretch of seemingly limitless water for many miles until the sight wearied him by its continuance.

Ultimately, he had struck a broad river flowing into the lake, and concluded it was the Hay river. If so, the police post should not be many miles distant. Crossing that river had been no joke, and he had been glad to find an abundance of wood on the farther side.

The beginning of uncomfortable doubt was creeping upon his mind, when a moving object, too far off to be seen distinctly, caught his vision. At once his field-glasses came into use, and,

in a moment, doubt was dispelled and replaced by satisfaction. The gauntlets, the straight brimmed, conical crowned hat, the saddle seat, were sufficient to help him identify the rider—a policeman.

A lift of the rein, and Skookum was hitting up the pace to cross the line of the constable. Having seen Harry, the latter altered his direction and came to meet him.

“Glad to see you,” were Harry’s first words—and he meant them.

Apart from this evidence that he had not come very far wrong, he was beginning to feel it good to be able to use his tongue again after five days’ enforced disuse.

“Same here, son,” grinned the constable.

He was a young fellow, very spruce and trim, wearing a small fair moustache above a very square chin.

“Looking for anything?” the policeman queried.

“Yes, something like you;” and Harry laughed, feeling hugely relieved. “I’m making for your post, and was beginning to fear I’d missed it badly. Is it far?”

“About two hours’ ride. Are you out of grub? Don’t usually expect visitors dropping in from this side. Where are you from?”

“Fort Scott.”

The constable whistled. “By th’ Lyard?”

“Yes.”

“All alone?”

“Sure.”

"Anything wrong, my son? Guess you haven't made this trip just to say 'Howdy do!' though I'm mighty glad to see you all the same. Gets a trifle lonesome up here at times. Don't you find it so? From the H. B. C. show, ain't you? No other settlement on the Lyard, far as I know."

"You're right; though I haven't been finding it lonesome just lately. Too much company, in fact."

The policeman glanced at the sun. "Come along to dinner and tell us," he said. "I was just going back when I caught sight of you. There's the sergeant besides myself."

At the fort—three strong, log-built shacks enclosed within a rail fence—the welcome was warm and the dinner good and hot, and Harry enjoyed both the food and the company; but he was hardly prepared to find the news he had to impart received with so much satisfaction.

The younger policeman laid down knife and fork, slapped a brown hand on his thigh, and cheered lustily.

"The best bit of news, sarge, this many a day," he declared. "Whoopee! but this is great. How many, did you say, there are in this jolly little gang that's started raising Cain?"

"Half a dozen; and the leader, anyway, is no bluffer," Harry replied.

"Wanted something to save us going asleep in this forgotten corner of Nothing located in

Nowhere ; and by th' hokey, we got it sure. Shake, my son. Guess your news just now has saved a man's life ;" and the constable, whose name was Ellis Ray, applied himself to his meal with renewed gusto.

The sergeant, Norton, was less exuberant in his excitement, but he made it quite clear that he fully appreciated Harry's action.

"A serious matter, Mr. Revell," he said ; "and it's you to thank if th' trouble don't get worse. We don't stay long in the same place, we police, but we can't be everywhere at once ; and this sort of thing you've been telling us about is better stopped right at the beginning than later. You've no doubt this Klondike outfit were the aggressive party ?"

"None at all," and Harry added to his relation of his interview with Ed. Gardner in camp over the matter of Many Tail's dog.

"And you took the rifle away from him ?" said the sergeant admiringly. Harry nodded.

"You had a nerve, sure. For that matter I haven't discovered the H. B. fellow without it. What did your boss have to say ?"

"He fully approved ;" and Harry's eyes twinkled. "You see, I happened to be my own boss."

"You're in charge ?" the sergeant's eyes opened.

"Yes ; Mr. Fraser had to leave in a hurry for Selkirk."

"He'd a good understudy," put in Constable

Ray. "Say, try a few more of these canned peaches, son."

"Well, it isn't your fault things are so fierce," commented Norton, "though I can quite see why this push of American toughs isn't handing out any bouquets to you. Wonder they didn't start to bust you up."

"Well, they tried; and there was a time when I thought they were going to do it," said Harry.

He described the attack on the fort, and the lucky arrival of Big Elk.

"I can tell you I was glad when I saw Gardner clearing out. I was being badly scared," he added.

"Reckon you were," Norton said drily. "Looks that way, eh, Ellis?"

"Oh, he's wasted, sure," the other policeman replied. "He ought to be one of us." And the pride in his voice was not to be missed.

Harry felt he had received a genuine compliment.

The meal finished, Sergeant Norton wasted no time.

"Now, Ray, put a jerk into it. Get this truck cleared up and put away," he said energetically. "We're due to get away smartly. And as I reckon this is too big a job for you to handle, I'm coming along. This Gardner push seems fairly lively, and I'm taking no risks with one against six."

"Think it means a scrap?" asked the constable hopefully, as he got on the move, Harry lending a hand.

"Shouldn't wonder, from what our friend here says. Trouble will be to find 'em, I reckon. They won't need telling where Mr. Revell has gone, if they find that out; and I can't see them staying long where they are with forty odd Indians stamping around looking out for hair. But as they can't go by water, 'n' they've no horses, I'm hoping they won't travel far. They're in a mighty bad fix, if they only knew it, short of grub and winter coming along. And they know if they turn south we'll get 'em sure."

"Sure! Bet you, sarge, they make nor'-west, meaning to lay up for the winter. There's cover enough between the Lyard and the Yukon to lose an army."

"You staying here, Mr. Revell?" asked the sergeant. "You're welcome. There's grub plenty, and——"

"Staying? What for?" interrupted Harry. "No, I'm hoping to get back with you. My place is at the fort, just as quickly as ever I can get there. As soon as you're ready to make a start, I am."

Within four hours of having sighted the Red Fort, Harry was starting the return journey. And it was going to be made, he told himself, under more agreeable conditions than the outward trip. That had been pretty much of a gamble; getting back was a certainty. He had the satisfaction of having accomplished a by no means easy piece of work; he had done what he considered his duty; and he had the com-

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panionship of a couple of men with whom he had quickly settled himself on the most friendly terms.

Five days of pleasant travelling, and he would be back at Fort Scott, with nothing more exciting to look forward to than the trivial incidents of ordinary existence, the small happenings that come daily with a certainty of repetition that becomes monotonous, begetting weariness and regrets.

Harry caught himself wishing that it were possible he could exchange the trader's jacket for the smart uniform of the men riding alongside him.

CHAPTER XIV

ALONE IN THE BLIZZARD

Back in England, when a small boy, Harry Revell had had a tooth drawn, under gas. From a condition wherein he had felt, seen, heard, smelt, and tasted nothing, a state in which he had somehow seemed to know he was still alive without the faintest trace of physical liveliness to assure him such was the fact, he had stepped abruptly, yet by a different process it seemed from awakening from ordinary sleep, into a small room with a red carpet, and found a stumpy, pale-faced, smiling young man by his side regarding him with some curiosity.

Harry had never forgotten the oddness of that moment. He had not been able to understand in the least how it was he had been one instant in a place where none of his senses was alive and yet himself was very much so, and in the next amid the very ordinary surroundings of the dentist's operating room.

He had asked his father and mother to explain it ; and they had not been at all able to explain it—to his understanding, anyway.

A repetition of that queer change, that transference from the unreal to the real which had so greatly puzzled him as a boy, seemed to have befallen Harry. He was sitting on Skookum, and Skookum had come to a dead standstill. Yet, during the moment before realising these

facts, he had not been aware that he and Skookum had any intimate connection; he had not been aware that Skookum was there at all; he had been unconscious of any sense of movement. He had been quite alone, and in somewhere or something wonderfully luminous, among shafts of light that were chasing each other continuously about the picture, mingling and interchanging with enormous rapidity. He felt that he had been wrapped up in a brilliantly coloured, warm cloud.

And now he was in darkness, an odd *white* sort of gloom, something tangible, that gave the impression of being smothered under cotton wool. And he was cold. By Jove! but he was cold!

"Get up!"

The words came out mechanically; Harry was not conscious of having uttered them. The action of his hand was mechanical likewise. But apparently Skookum understood. With a violent shake, almost a shudder, the cayuse lifted a hoof and plunged rather than moved forward.

The movement, though slight, had the effect of jarring the rider's brain. As though abruptly resuming activity after some crushing shock under which its functions had been temporarily suspended, it took up its work again at the point reached when the shock occurred.

At once Harry realised that the white gloom about him was the effect of the atmosphere having been replaced by millions upon millions of

particles of snow, infinitesimally small balls of hard, dusty snow that whirled along at blinding speed. There was a wind behind him driving the snow, a wind that did not blow like any ordinary wind, but swept upon him with a continuous and overwhelming pressure like that of solid stone. It seemed to be doing its best to hurl him to the ground, to keep him there, flattened out.

It roared in his ears as it drove him forward, deafening him. The chill of its touch was as of liquid ice. He felt himself stiffening under its appalling ferocity of cold and force. He must be in the saddle, but he felt nothing of the contact; doubtless his feet were in the stirrups, but he was physically unaware of the fact.

Yet, less than a minute ago—stay, was it a minute or an hour?—a day?—such wind as there had been was but a cool, light breeze upon his cheek; snow there had been none; the sky—he could have seen no sky now, even had it been possible to turn his eyes upwards, which it was not—had been a lovely, bright, if cold, blue.

And where were his companions? He could not say. They might be within hands' touch of him or a thousand yards distant.

He shouted—or tried to shout, not knowing if any sound left his lips. None certainly reached his ears. Maybe the wind smothered the sound; perhaps it was simply unable to pierce the hard pad of snow enveloping his head.

If there was a response to his shout, he did not catch it. The wind took care that only itself should be heard. Its thundering fury pounded into his ears even through their snow covering.

Harry's brain was working, even although he was ignorant he had a body.

"What," it asked; "what was the last thing that happened?"

It supplied an answer. The last happening Harry knew anything about before the blank out of which he had just awakened had fallen upon him was a remark by Sergeant Norton.

"I don't like the look of that blame cloud," the policeman had said.

And Harry had suddenly become aware of a small, but rapidly enlarging cloud, black as tar, spotting the blue sky in its nor'-west quarter.

And then, before anything could be done—shelter it had been impossible to seek, since shelter there was none, the level prairie unbroken by even the smallest clump of timber—the blizzard had struck them—a roaring, lunatic, hurricane wind that leaped suddenly from nowhere and struck at them with the force of a gigantic sledge hammer; a wind that brought with it a cloudburst of powdered ice of a lowness of temperature that numbed the flesh as it alighted; that stung like powdered glass; that filled everywhere at once; that came and kept on coming without cessation.

It was then that Harry's brain was blotted out for the time being.

Unable to face that tremendous onslaught of force and cold, Skookum had evidently turned his tail to it and scurried before its fearsome might, like a ship scudding before a gale. How the animal had contrived to keep its feet was a marvel. But the rider had been unaware of the change of direction.

Afterwards, Harry told himself it was a wonder he had not died then and there, as many a man, many a horse and ox, has died when caught by the full force of these deathly visitations, even though the period of exposure may have been but a few minutes. Had he fallen from the saddle, had Skookum stumbled, death had surely come. That the two had been able to keep moving he believed had saved their lives.

And now the wind had stopped, the strength of the blizzard exhausted by the fury of its own violence. Harry felt he could breathe again. With a big effort he lifted his stiffened right arm, and it came from the shoulder as though it had never a bend in it elsewhere; but a powerful effort of the will overcame the rigidity of the muscles, and with unfeeling hands he struck at, cracked, and broke away the coating of frozen snow that covered his face and ears. He rubbed at his eyes, until, with pain and cracking, the lids came apart far enough to enable him to see.

With the blizzard had gone the powdery, freezing snow that stung the skin like finely broken glass. Its place was taken by great

flakes, soft, lazy lumps of snow almost the size of a man's palm. The sky was full of them. They looked a good deal less like real snow than the cotton wool simulation that does duty on a theatre stage.

Thick already they lay upon the ground. The thick, bunchy grass, the lower-growing wild flowers, were already blotted out; the golden rods and the spear grass were bending under their rapidly growing weight. So far as the soft, ever moving curtain of drifting fleeces allowed the eye to range was a garment of whiteness.

Skookum was still moving forward, driven by an instinct of self-preservation; now and again the rough, tough little creature would shake himself, dislodging its white covering in a gently whirling cloud. Releasing the rein, Harry began to swing his arms, beating into quickening circulation the congealing blood within his veins by mighty blows across his chest.

For the first time he noticed that close about his body was enwrapped one of his blankets. He had no recollection of having attempted such protection; but beyond doubt it was to such use of the few seconds between the first sign of the blizzard's coming and its falling upon him with all the savage fury of a ravening beast that he owed the little life left in him.

With the faint trickle of warmth creeping through his body came recollection of his companions. Where were they? What had befallen

them? He had no notion. The blinding whirl of the blizzard's initial onslaught had hidden them effectually from his senses. In less than ten seconds he had become blind and deaf. They might be alive; they might have perished. God alone knew.

To seek them was impossible.

Skookum suddenly stumbled, but recovered himself, coming to a standstill. The ugly head was turned about with slow painfulness as if the brave little animal were anxious to assure itself the rider were still in his place.

"Up, lad; up, good old Skookum!" cried Harry, and almost jumped at the queer sound of his own voice, which seemed muffled.

His gloved hand smote encouragingly upon Skookum's withers, and the cayuse again moved onward.

To guide Skookum Harry made no attempt. As yet, he had not thought where he was going. Suddenly it occurred to him that, instead of riding in the direction of Fort Scott, he was travelling away from it. Well, for the moment it mattered little which way he was moving. His desire was for warmth, a fire. But a fire meant wood, and to search for timber with the snow falling so thickly as to form an impenetrable veil were vain. If he struck timber, it would be by accident. But he must keep moving.

The thought of his late companions came to him again. Abruptly he checked Skookum and, shoving one hand within the blanket to his

waist, he felt for and dragged his revolver from its holster. Elevating the muzzle, he pressed the trigger.

Three times in rapid succession he fired ; then waited a few seconds, his ears straining. But no answering sound reached him. He fired thrice again with as little result. With a sigh he pushed the revolver back.

"I must get warm," he muttered ; and with some difficulty contrived to draw his feet from out the stirrups.

But dismounting was still more difficult ; his will appeared to have lost control over his legs. Again and again he tried to raise his legs, but failed. Finally he fell off in a heap.

Getting up again was a torture, but accomplished at last by aid of the stirrup leather and saddle. When he essayed to walk, one hand hooked about the horn of the saddle, he felt he had not the strength to move one foot beyond the other. But the effort had to be persisted in and, after many tumbles, he went forward, with stiff knees and stumbling feet, heavy as lead.

More than once he told himself he must give it up ; the temptation to remain where he fell was all but uncontrollable ; yet an obstinate will persisted, driving him to regain his feet, until presently he felt, not warmer, for it was idle to speak of warmth when such did not exist, but less stiff and lifeless.

How much ground he actually made Harry had no notion, though to him it seemed that

he had been walking—if his progress could be called walking—for hours, and his muscles were as fatigued as though he had covered miles ; but the exercise drove from his limbs the awful deadness and stiffness that had been such a torture, and a feeling suggestive of warmth was creeping upon him when Skookum suddenly swerved and came to a standstill. The swerve bundled Harry full length into the snow, and he arose with a sense of weak anger against the cause of his mishap.

The fall cost Harry his feeble grip of the rein, and the cayuse, with a low whinnying, moved forward. Harry tottered after, came into severe collision with some unyielding object, and once more dropped upon the snow. Out went his hands mechanically as he tried to rise, and they touched something firm and solid.

For a few seconds his hands groped weakly ; then he cried out.

It was a tree with which he had collided. He had found timber.

The discovery put new life into him, and he plunged within the poplar grove, following Skookum. His hands seized the cayuse's tail, and he was dragged farther within the sheltering wood.

Here the cold was less intense, and, the means of warmth at hand, hope of soon enjoying the heat of a blazing fire stimulated him to a violent energy. Poplar is a good wood for quick burning, but birch is still better, and of these trees the wood held a goodly number.

Time and again the axe slipped and flew from his stiff fingers ; again and again the haft turned in his insecure grip. But at last a strip of bark was removed, and from the inner side he pulled away the loose fibre which responds so readily to the touch of a flame. He found matches. One was struck and applied to the little heap, and in an instant a flame leaped upwards.

He gave it no chance to die out, feeding it with small splinters at first, later with dead twigs and branches. Soon a goodly fire was burning, and, gloves removed, he crouched over the blaze, greedily absorbing the heat and feeling an almost delirious exultation as the warmth permeated his being, bringing with it renewed strength.

With difficulty he tore himself away and, able now to control the tool, set his axe edge to the trunks of a dozen small trees. These he chopped into logs, and presently had a pile extensive enough to keep the fire burning for two or three days. Even then it was with reluctance he desisted.

Half an hour before, he had craved for a fire as he had never in his life craved for anything. He would have a fire—a fire big enough for half a dozen men. What did it matter ? There was wood and to spare. And he piled on the logs until a perfect mound of glowing flames, crackling and roaring, rose towards the sky.

Then he sat down to enjoy it, until fear of actual roasting drove him to a respectful distance, and he recollected that he was hungry.

From Skookum Harry removed the saddle and grub bags, turning him loose. No fear that the cayuse would stray far. But before making supper—he knew well enough he would not do it after the meal—he dragged together the slender green birch boughs and arranged them for his bed. Six inches of pliant birch and a folded four-pointer underneath, a couple of blankets to roll himself in, and he would sleep better than a king.

Filling the kettle with snow, he placed it close to the roaring fire, and from the bag fished out a cast iron block of frozen bacon. With the axe he chopped away a few unsightly hunks and dropped them into the frying pan partly filled with already melted and hissing grease. While the bacon was sizzling, the flour bag was opened and bannock, or gillette, concocted. Hunger had now become an awful craving for food, and Harry was not feeling fastidious enough to spend time over "making up." Dropping a big pinch of baking soda on the nearer corner, with a twist of the finger he distributed it amongst the flour, made a hole by the simple expedient of driving his clenched fist into the heap, and into the hole poured a mugful of melted snow. Then a quick stirring, the formation of the moistened mass into a rude ball, a flattening out with the back of the hand, and into the pan with the concoction.

In a few minutes, the greedily watched mass had turned a crisp brown—indication that it was cooked, sufficiently, anyway, to satisfy Harry.

A mouthful of bacon, a mouthful of bannock : gee ! how good it was. To Harry it seemed as though more delectable food had never passed his lips. Another bite at the chunk of pork ; another mouthful of gillette, first dipping the corner to be eaten in the smoking grease of the fry-pan, and the lad was almost telling himself it was worth while enduring the misery and torture of the past hours that one might revel in the sheer physical delights of a fire such as that at which his legs were roasting, and food of a flavour compared with which the ambrosia of the gods could be only insipid and trivial.

What if the bacon were but plain fat and charred as to its exterior ! What if the bannock were hard and demonstrably raw, untouched even by the heat, as to its middle ! Enjoyment of the delicacies was not one whit lessened.

A sigh of complete contentment escaped Harry as the final morsel of pancake went down his throat.

" I wonder if those other fellows have been as lucky ? " he murmured, thinking of Norton and Ray.

But drowsiness was coming upon him and the speculation was not pursued. Rolling himself in the blankets, feet to the made-up fire, Harry fell immediately into the heavy, drugged sleep which comes to the out-of-doors dweller after a long day of severe physical trial.

The snow still continued to fall, unceasingly, tirelessly, if in lesser flakes than before. Outside the wood it already lay more than a foot

in depth. Within the timber, floating lazily down between the tree tops, it was no more than a light fleece covering the ground. The lessening flames of the fire sighed fitfully ; now and again a log cracked with a gentle report ; the heating sap in the green boughs hissed gently. From the white waste without there penetrated the occasional howl of a wolf ; from at hand came slurring, muffled sounds as Skookum industriously pursued his search for food. But nothing disturbed the sleeper—not even the sub-conscious recollection of the horrors of the blizzard, from the worst effects of which he had so providentially escaped.

CHAPTER XV

NIL DESPERANDUM

Everywhere are fire and food the essentials of human existence, but to none is this need made more acutely and painfully evident than to the dweller in the far north, the traveller in those mighty domains of the North American continent which lies in and about the Arctic circle; where man has as yet but placed a halting footstep, and primitive nature reigns supreme.

Existence in winter in these regions is simplified to such an extent that it embraces but two considerations—wood to burn and food to eat. Given these, a man has everything life demands. Without these is—Death.

When a man's wants are reduced to a minimum, those things which comprise the minimum he wants very badly indeed. There are no substitutes.

In more genial lands than those north of Lat. '56 a man toils for money, and is not satisfied unless he can obtain a great deal more than is just sufficient to provide the bare necessities of life. And there are so many things he considers as bare necessities. But north of '56 a man, wanting but fuel and grub, has to toil harder to supply these bare needs than his more southerly brother can form an idea of. And this although there is game in the country, and timber in plenty.

But the north is a country of distances ; and it is possible to wander fifty miles without, in winter, discovering anything to eat or to burn.

Now, in winter, without grub and without fire, a man will easily die before he has covered a half of fifty miles. And he need not be a tenderfoot to accomplish that much. Every winter, whole families, even to three-fourths of a tribe of natives, perish miserably for the want of just these two articles—fuel and food.

Harry Revell was too little of a tenderfoot to require any instruction in this matter.

To kick together the fire logs, ash whitened at their ends but with the fire still at their cores, was his first act after creeping from out his blankets next morning ; his next was to investigate his grub bags. The examination was not wholly satisfying ; and as he walked to the edge of the wood, though he hailed Skookum, pawing around in the snow, cheerfully enough, and stopped to stroke the cayuse's nose and give him a few kindly words, his mind was serious enough.

From the wood he saw little to reassure him. The snow was still coming down, without hurry, as though time were at a discount, gently and softly ; in flakes of no great size ; with a quiet purposefulness, as though knowing it had a lot to do but was blessed with plenty of time in which to do it. There was no wind. The sky was the colour of dull lead.

Harry shook his head. He wasn't liking

that sky at all. It seemed to tell of tons of snow waiting to come down.

The smallness, the leisureliness, of the snow were also disturbing. A snowstorm in a hurry, especially when the first of the winter, was not likely to be lasting. This had every appearance of being a stayer.

Harry almost wished he had not been so prodigal as to the overnight supper. The re-filling of the grub sacks struck him as highly problematical.

For he had not the ghost of a notion where he was. All very well to say he and the two policeman had been travelling nearly due west when the blizzard dropped from the sky, obliterated all things and separated him from his companions. Also, he had not forgotten that the last camp together had been on the western bank of the Hay river; nor that the blizzard had come out of the north, and that, as he had turned Skookum about and ridden before it, he must have been riding almost due south during the period when his mind was in oblivion. He recalled these things, but memory was blank as to where he was at the moment.

Very thoughtful, Harry went back to the fire, melted snow, made tea, chopped off and fried bacon, and concocted bannock—a smaller one than that of supper. Then he packed up, went to the saddle, and called Skookum.

He was going to get a move on.

Lunacy, was it, to venture out from the shelter of the wood, where fire and warmth,

at least, were assured him, into a desert of snow, with snow still falling, where there was neither guide nor landmark; to go he knew not whither, probably to something worse than he was leaving? "Rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of," came into his mind. Yet he meant doing it.

What was the alternative? To stay where he was. Yes, and how long? The snow might last a week. What then? He had food enough for five days left—seven at a pinch. Which was better: to remain warm and sheltered for a week, and then—starve, or to take a chance?

Harry was going to take a chance. Sitting down doing nothing was not his forte. Seven days in that wilderness of snow might see him within hand's touch of death. Well, better, anyway, to walk into one's grave than to sit in it for a week before ready to occupy it.

Besides, who could tell what might happen in a week? Sure, he wouldn't be likely to strike a settler's shack; there weren't any settlers thereabout, so far as he knew. But he might fall in with an Indian tribe, another lost wanderer like himself, even Norton and Ellis; stranger things than even that had happened.

"Come up, you old image, you ugly old villain!" he adjured Skookum, lifting the heavy saddle. "Come and work for your living instead of loafing around like this. We're going for a walk."

The cayuse was willing enough to walk,

though he shook his ugly head with considerable emphasis when discovering the conditions prevailing outside the wood ; but the question was—In which direction ?

Harry was in a quandary ; one way looked as good as—rather, no worse than—another. He reproached himself for having somehow lost his compass. Finally, he set his face to what he believed to be the west, grabbed the rein, and told Skookum to "Get up !"

Ride ? He knew better than that. He wanted to walk to keep warm, and the cayuse was going to have no easy time, even when unmounted, in getting over the soft snow. If only the snow would cease, with the intense cold prevailing, the ground would speedily become hard and firm enough for Skookum to go ahead at a fair pace. But the snow was not going to cease, judging by all appearance. It suggested a corporation contract.

"Get up !"

With a meticulous care suggesting infinite suspicion of the foothold, Skookum advanced one hoof. The march had commenced.

You have to make an eight or ten hours' tramp across a snow waste of apparently infinite extent to realise fully what such a trip means. The first time the tenderfoot tries the experiment, it isn't long before he wishes that he hadn't—that some other fellow was having the experience—that he was inside four thick timber walls. When at the same time snow is falling, these wishes are apt to become a

very definite craving to change places with the other fellow.

The journey is trying to one's mind, morale, and body.

Harry was not making a first experiment ; the previous winter had taught him something. But then he had had the satisfaction of knowing that he was travelling a definite trail, even if it could not be seen ; and that at the end of the trip was the certainty of the fort, food and companionship. The present journey was a very different proposition.

He didn't know in the least where he was going. He hardly expected to be near a trail, although he kept his eyes skinned for any blaze marks upon the trees, in isolated clumps or small groves, that occasionally showed up. And most certainly he could not estimate how long the trip would continue. But he did know that his food supply was good for but seven or eight days at the outside limit, and that, when the same was exhausted, chance of continuing to live was too small to think about.

This combination of things known and unknown tries a man's nerve. He cannot help doing some worrying. Some men worry more than others, and they are not to be called cowards for so doing, even if their worry leads them to extremes.

Harry had heard the yarn of a man lost in a blizzard, travelling for days under much the same conditions as he was experiencing, and worrying so much that he was able to bear it

no longer, and put a drastic end to it. He was found in the snow, a bullet through his brain and the revolver clenched in his frozen hand. Found, too—that was the irony of it—within a quarter mile of a settler's ranch. And that man was a member of the North West Mounted Police, a body of men not given to the breeding or encouragement of cowards.

A vivid imagination, unless under iron control, is a handicap to the wanderer in the north. Unfortunately, that wanderer needs to own a big supply of hopefulness, and hope and imagination generally are found together.

As the afternoon advanced, Harry began to keep an eye open for a suitable camping place. The snow had diminished somewhat, but seemed as far away from a stoppage as ever. Timber had been becoming more scarce. He was feeling pretty tired generally, and about played out as to his legs. An exercise more tiring than several hours' tramping across several inches of soft snow, with the continuous effort of lifting the knees, has yet to be found. His hands were cold ; his feet were cold. In fact, he was getting concerned about his feet. He wished he had slipped a pair of moccasins into a pocket, riding boots being about the most unsuitable of footgear for long tramping in snow. They lead to frostbite, being too hard and close-fitting.

At length, after a toilsome wandering amid a maze of low bare hills, Harry found himself travelling a long and gently sloping decline,

and held on until, through the snow, he had a glimpse of a few bare trees. At that spot he made camp, unable to go farther. There were severe pains darting along his shin bones, and the muscles in front of the thighs were cramped and sore. The effect of a scanty meal of bacon and cold bannock—he would not halt to light a fire—had passed away, and he was feeling cold and empty inside. To go on was imprudent, although a camp in such an exposed situation was not inviting.

Within a little while he had cleared a space of the soft snow—a trench about eight feet long and half as wide, consolidating the sides as well as he could. At one end he built a fire. Lying within the trench, feet to the fire and his blankets well tucked about him, he would keep warm enough—warm as was possible, anyway. Beggars can't be choosers. The kettle was packed with snow, well rammed down to prevent a hole being burned in the bottom, bacon chopped off, and bannock made.

It was with a rueful expression Harry regarded the quantity of food he had allotted himself; but although he could have accommodated comfortably twice as much, he had the strength of mind to refrain from indulging his appetite. The fire made up, two big logs set end on into the flames, and more fuel ready for next morning, Harry rolled into the blankets, warm, fed, and tired enough to sleep dreamlessly.

For the moment he had but one worry—his pony. For Skookum he could provide neither

warmth nor food; and the thought of the unfortunate cayuse passing the bitter night in the open, the snow still continuing, cold and hungry, made him unhappy.

A bitter trial, indeed, was it for one loving animals to undergo, thus to lie snug and warm, and at the same time to realise fully the impossibility of ameliorating in the slightest degree the suffering of a faithful friend.

The next morning Skookum was not to be seen, nor was there a trace of the pony to be found. The still falling snow was quick to cover up all tracks. But it had not covered up the body of Skookum. Harry made sure of that, spending more than an hour before breakfast in searching about the neighbourhood of the camp for the tell-tale mound indicating where the wretched cayuse, overcome by cold and hunger, had collapsed. Finding nothing, he felt relieved, although hardly knowing why, since, as it was evident the animal must have wandered away during the night, it must be that final exhaustion and death could be only longer delayed.

With a heavy heart Harry broke camp. The remainder of his food, kettle, pannikin, and fry-pan he had put together in one bag, and this, with his roll of blankets, none of which he could bring himself to discard, made a heavy load to pack on his shoulders. His rifle, in its cover, he was tempted to leave behind, on account of the additional weight, but ultimately decided to take it along, using it as a staff.

- It might be that the weapon would prove the means of saving him from ultimate starvation; on the other hand, its use might merely procure a prolongation of the agony.

Head down, Harry tramped doggedly forward, his eyes protected against the liability to the awful disaster of snow blindness by the simple expedient he had adopted of blackening around his eyes and along the sides of his nose with a lump of charred wood.

After a couple of hours or so, the snow ceased abruptly, and he was thankful; for, having no hood to protect his face, he had been fearful that the wetting of his skin caused by the melting snow would produce frostbite. Also, he was now able to see about him, though there was but scant comfort or encouragement to be derived therefrom.

He was in the middle of a white waste, dazzlingly brilliant under the yellow light of the sun, which presently broke through and dispelled the leaden-coloured pall that had overhung the earth since the coming of the blizzard. Dead level seemed that vast plain, though the lad knew that actually it was not so. It had no limits. It conveyed the feeling, so forcibly and insistently that this strengthened into a conviction, that there was no escape from it; that one might travel for ever and ever and still find oneself within the wall-less white prison.

By four o'clock in the afternoon Harry calculated he had walked fourteen miles, and

then he camped, so worn out that he could hardly put one foot in advance of the other. Before going to sleep, he spent some time rubbing the muscles of his legs before the roaring fire, using the hot lard left in the fry-pan. The next morning he was glad to find the pain no longer troubled him.

With the sun to guide him, he changed the course of his direction, only to find at the end of the third day afoot an obstacle in the form of a wide river. This he judged to be the Black river, and hailed the appearance of it with delight, knowing it as a tributary of the Lyard, which it joined at no great distance from Fort Scott.

His spirits rose. All he had to do was follow the river eventually to regain the fort—if his food held out long enough, an *if* of considerable proportions, as he had to admit, when he came to overhaul the grub bag.

Then there was the crossing of the river. Two days he followed it, and had made up his mind to get over by swimming and take the risk of immersion in the deadly cold water—still running strongly in the middle, though ice extended several feet from either bank—when he had the good luck to strike an abandoned Indian canoe shoved into the bank. There was a big hole in it, but by stuffing into this one of his blankets he contrived to keep the canoe afloat and get across without a complete wetting.

Luck was with him that day. His clothes

dried at a huge fire he built, he was going down to the river to cut a hole in the ice and fill his kettle, when a calf moose suddenly pushed its head from out a clump of spruce trees less than twenty yards away.

Harry stopped dead in his tracks and sank to the ground in one movement, his eyes glued to the animal. Here was meat and to spare—if he could get it. His Winchester was at the camp, and to return for it was a risk not to be run. He would take a chance with his six-shooter. With infinite care, he noiselessly extracted the revolver, fearing that at each moment the animal's eyes would be turned on him; but no suspicion of danger appeared to enter the brain of the moose. Clear of the timber it walked out and stood still, staring directly at the river.

Squatting on one heel, elbows on knees, the revolver held in both hands, Harry drew a bead on the young moose. His finger was already pressing on the trigger when a splendid cow moose stalked from out of the spruce clump. More wary than her offspring, her eyes swung from left to right, fell on Harry's huddled form, and from a standing jump that carried her a good ten feet sideways, she broke into a tremendous gallop. Before the startled youngster had realised that its parent had scented danger and was able to follow her example, Harry's revolver cracked and a bullet had struck its mark, just below the ear. Instantly the moose whirled about as though to

seek refuge whence it had come, and if a second bullet missed, the third went home, and the calf toppled and fell.

That evening at supper Harry ate moose steak along with his bannock ; and if the meat were a trifle too dry to satisfy the epicure in deer flesh, it was tender enough and good enough to more than content the lone eater, who to the satisfaction of the moment was able to add the gratification derivable from the knowledge that he was provided with meat to last him for several days to come.

There was no warmth in the brightly shining sun, and the air was keen and cold enough to send little tingling pains shooting from the nostrils into the head, when Harry made up his pack the following morning. The overnight frost that had crisped the gleaming surface of the snow to an unyielding, steel-like texture still held good and was sufficiently intense for an ungloved hand to be rendered numb after a minute's exposure ; but with all that, Harry bore a light heart as he stepped out at a good pace.

Sixty miles at the outside, say half a dozen days of easy travelling, and he would be back at the fort—and by no means sorry to be there. His stock of flour was well-nigh exhausted, but with economy the tea would last out ; while the carcase of the moose calf would provide him with all the meat he needed.

Though there might not be anything to crow about, he was satisfied he had done well enough.

He had been lucky. Many a good man had gone under and left his bones to whiten on the plains, victims of blizzards less severe than that from which he had had so providential an escape.

He hoped Sergeant Norton and Constable Ellis Ray had had no worse fortune than himself.

His one regret was the loss of Skookum. In that he felt he had been to blame. Far better if, instead of leaving the poor animal to the mercy of the frost and snow, or, worse still, to the teeth of hungry wolves, he had taken his revolver and sent a merciful bullet into the cayuse's brain. Many times, indeed, had such suggested itself to him, but he had been unable to nerve himself to the act.

With the river to guide him, mistake in his direction was now out of the question, and the well wooded banks assured him against the want of fuel.

He was a lucky fellow—perhaps more lucky than he deserved.

So strongly did he feel about his luck that he was tempted into song.

*"'Tis better to be born lucky than rich ;
It's a saying you'll hear to this day."*

It was a song he recollected having heard his father sing, but after the first two lines, he stopped abruptly. It was too cold to sing. The numbing air got down the throat into the lungs, chilling them, and he could feel the blood receding from its approach.

And so on again, silent, but no less light of heart, until it was time to halt for midday meal.

Harry's legs were now in good condition, and, over-persuaded by the absence of any feeling of fatigue, he held on the march without thought of camping until late in the afternoon. Before him stretched a curving ridge of low hills which came right down to the river, with many small projecting spurs and bluffs well covered with timber. This ridge he set his mind upon reaching before making camp; but the clearness of the atmosphere made the apparent distance a deception, and by the time the outlying bluffs were gained the position of the sun gave warning that no time was to be lost.

He was glancing around for a suitable spot, when his eyes were arrested by the sight of a fair-sized tent, dark-coloured, and hardly discernible against the backing of trees close by which it had been pitched.

For the tent he made right away. Whoever was inside would be certain to admit him to its hospitality.

As he drew closer he could see that for several feet about the tent the snow had been cleared away and banked high to form a protection against wind and the awful cold. The cleared space had been partially floored with green spruce boughs, while away from these and facing the tent opening were the black remains of a big fire.

Around the outside of the tent four sledges had been turned up edgeways.

"Quite a party," Harry told himself. "And been camped here some while. Trappers, I guess, held up here by the big snowstorm and not willing to get moving until they think there's no likelihood of its return."

With brisk steps he made for the tent, being at no pains to lessen the trampling and scrunching of the crisp snow under his tread. He was within the spruce-floored clearing when the tent flap was drawn aside and a man's head and shoulders thrust out.

The half-formed words of greeting froze on Harry's lips as the eyes of the man met his.

The man was Jesse Gardner.

CHAPTER XVI

OLD ACQUAINTANCES

If Harry Revell was surprised by the sight of the man facing him—and no one had been farther from his thoughts at that moment—Jesse Gardner was fully as astonished. For half a minute the pair stared fixedly.

"You!" said the goldseeker at length; and, as though still uncertain, he pushed his head forward for a yet closer inspection. "Sufferin' Moses!"

Came a voice from within the tent.

"What's th' trouble, Jesse? Who is it?"

Harry laughed; he couldn't help it. There was something so truly ludicrous in thus happening upon the men whom of all others he was least desirous of meeting.

"Who in Halifax 've ye gotten holt of out there?" again queried the inquisitive person within.

But Gardner did not answer. Perhaps he was unwilling to deprive the rest of the outfit of any part of the shock awaiting them.

"Come right inside," he said to Harry.

"Thank you," replied Harry politely; and he swung the heavy pack from his shoulders.

He was going into the tent—not because he was afraid of and did not want to offend Gardner, but because he really did not see why he should not.

There was no sense in making a hurried retirement. To continue his journey, even if Gardner made no effort to prevent him, was out of the question at that hour. Did he decline, and go to make a camp for himself, he would not be able to hide himself so that the Klondikers could not find him. A fire he must have, and that would be sufficient to betray him, did the men make up their minds to kill him. Taking all things into consideration, he believed himself as safe, sitting in the same tent with them, as he would be if he were a few hundred yards away from them.

To let your enemy see, anyway, that you haven't any fear of him is by no means a bad move.

Gardner pulled the tent flap wholly aside and stepped back.

"It's th' kid from th' H. B. post," he said, facing his people.

And Harry, stepping inside—there was not a deal of spare room—met four pairs of genuinely wonder-stricken eyes with a pleasant smile. Only Charley, the half-breed, was not giving him the closest attention. After one quick glance, he turned his gaze upon the stove and stared at it steadily, as though the entrance of the person who, as they had every reason to believe, was chiefly responsible for the failure to make their entry into the Yukon, were a matter of the utmost indifference.

"Well," observed Harry dropping down his pack and sitting upon it; "I saw your tent

as I came along up to the bluff, but it never occurred to me that I was going to find you in it."

"Sure not," agreed Ed. Gardner, and began to chuckle with huge amusement.

"Comfortable in here," went on Harry, looking about, and particularly at the sheet iron Yukon stove, fed with spruce sticks, its sides and half of its short stovepipe glowing bright red. "That's a dandy stove."

"Sure," said Simmins, with a weak attempt at heartiness and a covert glance at Jesse Gardner, who was standing by the closed tent flap, pipe clamped between his teeth.

And Martin nodded in confirmation.

"It's real good of you asking me to share with you," Harry continued, cheerfully, as though never an angry word had passed between him and his listeners. "You've had supper, I suppose?" he enquired politely, looking around.

"Dot so," the young Swede replied.

"Well, I haven't, and it wasn't much of a snack at mid-day," Harry informed all and sundry affably. "I've the grub with me. Any objection to my using your excellent stove to cook something?"

No one answered, and Harry looked questioningly at Jesse Gardner.

"D' you mind? I'm hungry."

"Go ahead," the leader said curtly.

He was looking at Harry from under down-drawn brows with a puzzled, uncertain expression in his lowering eyes. To his brother, when the latter spoke, he gave no attention.

"Ain't he a peach?" demanded Ed. delightedly, nodding at Harry.

Harry, apparently unconscious of the curiosity he was exciting, unfastened his pack, turned out a chunk of moose meat, from which he chopped a thick slice, and proceeded quietly with the operation of frying it. Then he made tea and bannock, carrying on a one-sided conversation the while, and sat down to eat with excellent appetite. Now and then, when he glanced up to find a pair of eyes fixed on him—as there always was—he would nod and smile pleasantly, as though it had not happened that, a week before, he and two of his companions had been actively engaged shooting at one another.

Such confidence and self-possession were remarkable; to one of the six they suggested a state of things as yet unrevealed.

"Say, Jesse, what in thunder's his bluff?" queried Ed. Gardner of his brother in a husky whisper.

The elder Gardner shook his head impatiently. Surely Revell was bluffing. It couldn't be true that he hadn't something up his sleeve. To the American it was out of the question that the lad should so deliberately walk into the lion's den. He must have some kind of a backing—say a score of those cursed red swine hiding around outside amongst the timber. Up to now there hadn't been anything in the kid to suggest he was a grand-stander.

It was necessary to go cautiously and find

out exactly the lie of the land. When the cat did jump, as Gardner suspected it presently would, it would not be well to be taken wholly by surprise.

"Winter jumped in on us pretty quick, eh?" suggested Harry, still bent on keeping up the simulation of friendliness, at least until he had satisfied his hunger.

His nimble play of tongue as well as teeth had not interfered with some very serious thinking. As well as the Gardner crowd, he had been mentally asking questions and indulging in much speculation. And he had come to a few conclusions.

In spite of his seeming indifference to aught but the satisfying of his appetite, his eyes had been busy elsewhere than upon the stove. It had not escaped him that Simmins was wearing a bandage around his head—not a protection against the cold, he surmised. A small patch and a number of spots of dark colour on the upper part of Ed. Gardner's coat had been noted, and he connected them with a comparatively recent wound in the man's cheek, which, he believed, was the result of a bullet rather than accident. And his conclusion was that, since his leaving of the post, a further brush between the goldseekers and the Indians had taken place.

From the finding of the party where it was, he argued they had had the worse of the encounter, and were now engaged in making a get-away from the neighbourhood. Continuation

of their journey into the Yukon had been knocked on the head by the loss of their boats ; and it was no unreasonable assumption Gardner had made up his mind to return south until the break-up of the winter would allow of a fresh start.

He did not believe Gardner's retreat was due to a suspicion of the object that had sent himself from the post. Had the man any fear of the police, he would not be leading his party south or east, but west, where, in the vast and unexplored region between the Lyard and Pelly rivers, existed countless secure hiding places and, even in winter, the materials for sustaining existence were obtainable.

Necessity, not inclination, he concluded, had driven the outfit east.

Were that the truth (and, as a fact, Harry's reasoning was not far from the mark), his own position was none of the safest, considering the likely temper of the outfit, its plans brought to nothing, as it would hold, by his interference. But, anyway, he wasn't going to make it evident he thought so.

"I said that winter seems in a mighty hurry," he repeated, looking around as he wiped the last streak of grease from the fry-pan with the final morsel of bannock. "Something of a snowstorm for so early on."

"Der snow vos bad," agreed the Swede after no one else had appeared anxious to make a reply.

"But you have sledges ; you're lucky," went

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on Harry, determined not to notice the general unreadiness at conversation.

"Oh quit!" came from Jesse Gardner impatiently.

He moved from the flap, where he had been standing the while Harry had been eating his supper, and sat down on the floor of green birch, but not away from the opening.

"When you done discussin' th' weather, maybe you'll leave off 'n' listen t' me," he remarked. "I got something to say."

"I reckoned you had," Harry replied, turning about to face him, shifting so as to get his back close to the tent wall. "Fire away."

Gardner eyed him steadily for a few seconds, a grim kind of a smile playing about his mouth. Then—

"Where you come from?" he asked abruptly.

"Along the river."

"F'r how long?"

"Two days."

"'N' where before that?"

"The other side of the river. You seem curious."

"I am. I'm here t' find out where you been 'n' what you been doin'—'n' I'm goin' to know," returned Gardner menacingly.

"And suppose I tell you that it's no business of yours?" asked Harry coolly.

There was nothing to be gained by keeping up pretence longer; as well get to grips now as later.

"Then I sh'd tell you that ye're an almighty

liar, 'n' a fool as well," Gardner retorted viciously. "How long you been away from th' fort?"

"Long enough to do what I wanted."

"Easy now, kid; go easy. Y' don't want t' rile us none," struck in Ed. Gardner. "You jes' tell us what we want to know, an' it'll be th' better f'r ye. You makes any mistake an' gets gay or sassy, an'—wal, guess ye c'n see f'r yeself that ye stand 'bout as much chance as a snowflake on a fire. You answer up good 'n' quick 'n' tell us what's true, 'n' we won't do no more'n we're obliged——."

"An' if he don't feel that way, he c'n take what's coming to him," the brother interrupted savagely.

"Meaning, I suppose, that you'll kill me," said Harry. "You'll think a second time about that when you know the police are out hunting your trail."

Jesse Gardner let out a violent oath as he came quickly to his feet, and his right hand went to the holster at his belt.

"What's that, hey?" he roared, the smouldering fire in his eyes flashing into evil flame.

"I say that the police are out hunting you," returned Harry; and he, too, stood erect.

"You son-of-a-gun! so that's where you been?" Gardner shouted.

"It is; and when they get you—and the police don't miss much they start out for, don't you forget—it'll go a whole lot harder

with you if it's murder up against you in addition to raising trouble with the Indians."

Gardner stood irresolute, revolver half drawn, muttering. Harry's warning as to the police had had visible effect upon the other men, the half-breed excepted. The faces of Martin and Simmins showed real consternation ; the young Swede was frankly alarmed. Even Ed. Gardner changed countenance. All had been long enough in the Dominion to have learned of the rapidity of the movements of the police, the tenacity with which they stuck to a trail, the sureness with which they followed upon the evildoer and brought him to judgment. Men might sneer and talk big and defiantly when the police were not at hand, but there were mighty few who did not in their hearts fear them. They represented a moral as well as a physical force. They were a power to be reckoned with.

Ed. Gardner picked his way towards the stove and began to feed it, with an elaborate assumption of ease ; but as he passed his brother he whispered " Go easy, Jesse."

" Maybe I am in your power now," went on Harry, following up his advantage ; " but don't forget that whatever you do to me won't be the finish so far as you're concerned. You want to know where the police are now : well, I can't tell you ; I don't know. But it's no bluff when I tell you that they are searching for you ; and, sooner or later, they'll get you. Killing me won't stop them, but it's going to make a difference to you at the finish."



"HARRY LIFTED HIS FOOT AND STEPPED BACK."

"If they get us," sneered Gardner.

"Don't you worry about that," came the swift retort. "Almighty Voice was as cunning as any of you, and he had other Indians to help him; but the police got him in the end, even though they did take more than a year about it. And they'll get you the same way."

"But you won't know anything about it," cried Gardner furiously.

And unable to control himself further, he whipped the revolver out. But Harry had been on his guard. Eye, brain, and muscle were keyed up for prompt action. He sprang quickly forward before the man had finished speaking and, not waiting for the weapon to be raised—your expert gunman meaning action is apt to shoot from the hip—he struck a chopping blow downwards at Gardner's wrist. Fingers relaxed, and the revolver fell upon the floor, where it was immediately covered by Harry's foot.

For a space the two stood eye to eye, faces a bare foot apart, neither breathing, the man with lips drawn back from his tobacco-stained teeth. The others, frozen into immobility, stared fixedly at the pair.

Suddenly, Harry lifted his foot and stepped back.

"Pick up your gun and don't make any further kind of fool of yourself," he said quietly. "You're six to one, and if you've the idea that preventing me from getting back to my post is going to do you any good, why you're able to do it. I know that. Not that it will benefit you. But if you mean shooting right now—well, go ahead."

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He had pulled his own gun as he began speaking and stood ready for action, shooting hand at his hip, and muzzle covering the middle of Jesse Gardner's body.

For the space of perhaps a minute no one in that tent moved ; the dead silence was broken only by the crackling of wood within the stove.

There was no yellow streak in Jesse Gardner ; bully the man might be, but it is only your stay-at-home, who theorises from an arm-chair, from his own limited experience as a boy and amongst persons who live with a keen anticipation of the activities of the forces of easily accessible law, that pins his faith to the old copy-book maxim that a bully is invariably a coward. He isn't ; a wider experience than the stay-at-home possesses has proved the fact upon innumerable occasions. It is time that maxim were washed out of the copy-book, for its acceptance has led many a young man into all kinds of trouble. And if the same has resulted in no more than his disappointment, he is lucky. Only too often it has meant a bad beating up. Sometimes it has meant death.

Jesse Gardner was no coward. He had been well in and held his own in more than one gunfight in the frontier and mining towns of his native west, where the bad man is not yet wholly a dead letter, and he was well acquainted with what passes current in such places as the rules of the game, which are simple, merely comprising the conviction that it is better to be the live man than the dead one.

Also he had learnt to recognise the signs telling when a shooter is in dead earnest—the firm lips, the queer, intent expression of the unwinking eyes, the remaining in one place of the muzzle of the threatening weapon. Staring at Harry Revell, he read those signs. He realised there was facing him one who meant action, and not merely the fellow who talks loudly but who will hesitate the fatal second to press upon the trigger. The latter type is to be bluffed, deceived out of his advantage, but there's no bluffing the man who means business. You don't take chances with that man. Jesse Gardner wasn't taking chances.

"Put yer gun up," he said surlily. "No one's talkin' of shootin'."

"Drew your gun only as a bluff?" returned Harry. "Don't try it again."

"That's it," put in Ed. Gardner eagerly. "Let's sit down an' talk things over." He attempted a laugh.

The tension was relaxed. Only the moody-faced half-breed showed no change of expression. Harry had not overlooked that man. Perhaps he was even more dangerous than Jesse Gardner himself, the Indian blood in him making for a disregard of consequences that only the very few white men ever are able to accomplish. Whatever Gardner told that man to do he would do without question or argument, so Harry was assured. He needed watching.

"It's this way," continued the younger Gardner, with a fine show of frankness. "You,"

nodding at Harry, "'ve gotten a down on us; you set th' police after us; 'n' we, jes' nachally, don't want th' police t' lay holt of us. 'Bout how it figures out, ain't it?"

"That's about the situation," agreed Harry, sitting down again.

"Police don't get us," declared Jesse Gardner emphatically.

"Sure not," assented Simmins, backing up the leader.

"Sure," returned the echo.

Oleson shook his head vigorously.

"Me neither," continued Ed., still conciliatory, and smiling at Harry. "But we reckons that if you gets away from here you'll put in time helping th' blame police; an', nachally again, that ain't best for us. Am I right, mister?"

"Yours is a fair assumption, from your point of view," agreed Harry. "Though I've told you that at the moment I don't know where the police are."

"Reckon y' could soon find out," put in the other cunningly. He went on, glancing at his brother. "Now what I suggests is that we hikes out, as intended, an' takes you along with us, meanin' no harm, course. For, say," he leaned over and tapped Harry confidentially on the knee; "you wasn't expectin' we'd be helpin' you along where you wants t' go?"

"I shouldn't expect it of you."

"Wal then;" and Gardner looked around at the interested faces with the confidence of a public speaker who has stated a way out of

a difficulty that must appeal to all concerned.
 • "Wal then, gents, what's th' matter with my proposition, hey?"

"And if I don't agree with it?" suggested Harry.

"You'll do as we like, agreein' or not," declared Jesse Gardner violently, unable longer to control the anger and impatience he felt. "You!" He faced Harry, features dark with passion. "You bust up our trip. You set them cursed red swine on us. You wouldn't let us have no grub. You steps in 'n' spoils our plans. You starts th' police after us. An' now, sitting in here, one against six of us, you've th' gall to tell us what yer goin' to do 'n' what yer won't do. You'll do what we like. See. It's my say—so that goes right here 'n' now, 'n' don't ye forget it. You'll blame well do what yer told t' do. Yer bein' treated as such a skunk don't deserve t' be treated. Yer bein' let off easy. There's men as 'd 've put a bullet through yer heart an' thought no more of it than shootin' a coyote. Yer lucky I ain't one o' that kind. Boys, Ed's. right; it ain't safe t' let this skunk loose. He won't be let loose. He's comin' along with us, where we go. 'N' if he don't feel like comin', there's just one other thing he c'n do—stay right here. 'N' keep on stayin', until Judgment Day."

"Say, cap, ye don't mean——" began Martin timorously.

"I mean what I says," broke in Gardner. "He stays. No, we won't do a thing to him."

Don't you worry none, you Martin, about th' police; I'm not talkin' of shootin'. But he stays all right. Guess there's a yard 'r so of rope we c'n spare; 'n' when he's tied up, guess th' cold an' want o' grub'll do all we want without yer conscience findin' any call to worry itself. You," he turned on Harry. "You make up yer mind 'n' make it up quick. Which 'll it be?"

And Harry, smooth-faced and steady-eyed, in a cheerful tone that suggested the acceptance of a hospitable invitation, replied readily—

"Oh I'm coming along with you. That's the next best thing to what I meant doing."

There are times when circumstances may be fought; the wise man is he who knows the right time to permit circumstances to have their own way. Assuredly the present was no moment for knocking one's head against a brick wall. Later, the mortar might loosen.

A dash for freedom was foredoomed to failure. Even though he got out of the tent at the point of his gun, where was Harry to go? To the timber? Six to one, they'd shoot him down without giving a chance. Could he get right away—even compass a long start; what then? He could see the snow-shoes besides the tent, and he wanted no telling that, thus equipped, the men could trail him down, overtake him, and bushwhack him before half a day passed.

It was humiliating, no doubt; but for the time being, anyway, he would have to do as he was told, not as he wanted.

CHAPTER XVII

UP NORTH

Jesse Gardner's expressed contempt for the Police notwithstanding, the information of which Harry Revell had made them a gift caused a serious alteration in the plans of the party. To continue south with the police active on their account was too full of risk. Long after the rest, Harry included, had fallen asleep, Jesse and his brother sat near to the stove in earnest, low-voiced discussion.

It was finally decided between them that camp should be broken the following morning, and that they head north for the Trout Lake region.

"Charley's been along there once, he says," asserted the elder brother. "Spent a winter along with some red-skinned bunch. There's hills 'n' coulees a plenty for safe hidin', an' timber galore. We'll get hid up safe enough."

"And comp'ny?" queried Ed. "If there's any blame Indians araound they won't fergit t' let th' police know."

"We'll fix up close by th' lake 'n' be all right," was the confident rejoinder. "The red swine don't go near it, 'cordin' to Charley. Bad medicine, or some kinder blame foolery 'r other."

"Gee; but it'll be cold;" and Ed. shivered in anticipation.

"No worse 'n if we was where we oughter be—would be but for him," replied Jesse, with an added curse and a venomous glance at the still form of their prisoner.

"An' what about grub? We gotten none so much as it is."

Jesse Gardner laughed shortly.

"Reckon I know who'll be goin' without grub first if we comes to gettin' short," he answered. "D' ye want tellin' who's most important to keep alive of this yer outfit? I know."

His brother nodded his head and grinned in assent.

At dawn Harry felt a substantial kick in his ribs and sat up quickly, for the moment scarcely realising his surroundings.

"Get up," Gardner ordered surlily. "You'll break th' neck o' th' day. You ain't goin' t' be paid in grub to sleep all day 'n' nothin' else. Get right up 'n' tend to th' stove 'n' fix up breakfast."

Grrr! but it was cold, in spite of the smallness of the tent and the seven men who had slept in it. Harry's fingers were numb as he drew on his boots. He felt envious of the fur mitts and the warm skin outer clothes of his fellows.

He shivered some more as he stepped outside the tent, glancing up at the sky, only barely lightening in the east and the stars yet visible, though paling. No doubt but that the cold was increasing. Already the temperature was much lower than was usual for so early on in

the winter, though nothing to what it would be in a few weeks' time.

But it was no time for admiring sky effects. Laziness stands a mighty poor show when the mercury is hanging around 35 or so below. Seizing his axe, he fell to work on the great pile of wood heaped close to the tent.

While he busied himself starting the stove, the others were already about, engaged in packing together the gear. No one spoke, Gardner excepted, just to give an order, though now and again an angry exclamation would be let slip, condemnatory of the chilling cold or a stumble.

Presently there was a roaring in the stove as the flame took hold of the small spruce ; a hint of warmth diffused itself throughout the tent.

Simmins, passing close to Harry, drew his attention to the sacks containing the food. The man smiled weakly.

" You gotten th' warmest job," he observed. The rest simply took no notice of him.

But they dropped whatever they had and sat down promptly, facing the now red-hot stove, soon as he intimated the meal was ready.

It was quickly despatched. Tea, strong, black, and pungent, sugarless, went down in scalding gulps. Pork and gillette vanished as quickly as though before hungry wolves. No need in the northern winter to get up early to arouse an appetite.

A minute was spent in cramming tobacco

into strong-smelling pipes ; then Martin and Simmins proceeded to take down the tent.

"Pack it on the forward sledge," ordered Gardner. "An' you—," he turned to Harry—"shove the stove with the tent."

The work was to be done, and Harry did his full share, working briskly and strongly, though from no idea of mitigating the ill-feeling against himself which it was only reasonable should exist. A roll in the snow at once cooled the stove pipe to a dull black. Next he dragged out the stove and emptied it of ash and partly burned sticks. A touch of the foot, and it was on its side in the snow. There sounded a faint, muffled hissing, and already the iron was cool enough for it to be safely packed on top of the tent.

Oh yes, it is cold enough in the nor'-west !

"What's th' kid doin' ?" enquired Ed. Gardner, stamping past his brother, carrying a flour sack. "Haulin' ?"

"Break trail," was the curt reply. "You hear, you ? Get alive. Ye'll see th' shoes."

Breaking trail is the hardest and most fatiguing work of winter travelling ; and if Harry obeyed at once and began to fit on the snow-shoes, it was with small enthusiasm. They were of the Alaskan native pattern, great, clumsy-looking articles five feet long and over a foot broad. He indicated his feet to Gardner.

"You expect me to wear these with boots ?" he asked.

"We ain't providin' moccasins for folks that

come to us unwanted," Gardner answered indifferently, and turned away to add a grub sack (part of the plunder taken from the Indians, which the Klondikers had succeeded in carrying away with them) to one of the sledges.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Needs must," he muttered.

But he looked forward to what was ahead with little pleasure. True, he was no novice in the art of using the snow-shoe, but there's a mighty lot of difference between using the same with boots and the soft, loose, and yielding moccasin. A snow traveller would say that boots are impossible. Maybe, but he'd just have to make them possible, having nothing else.

There was a bad time ahead of him with the *mal de raquette*, that diabolical torment which afflicts the improperly shod or inexperienced snow-shoer; which begins with a simple ache in the foot, works through stages wherein you feel red-hot bodkins being shoved and twisted around in the instep with every pace taken, and pains shoot up the legs and wriggle around the mechanism of the knee joints, suddenly become rusty and stiff, until the final condition of twisted, cramped, and knotted leg muscles is reached, when the sufferer can no longer keep on his feet, is ready to shout and weep with the awful pain, and would cheerfully pay away all he owns on this earth to the man willing to club him mercifully out of existence.

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That was coming to Harry, and he knew it.

It came all right. The hard leather of the boots pressed into his flesh, causing sharp pains within a few minutes of starting at the head of the procession to pound a trail through the crumbly snow, leaving a two-foot-wide track along which the sledges, their runners gliding easily over the consolidated snow, were dragged, each hauled by a single man.

Gee! but it was cruel work! Behind Harry walked Charley, and Harry did not fail to note that the half-breed's rifle was carried ready for prompt action. Ed. Gardner followed, with the big Swede next, Martin and Simmins behind, the four hauling a sledge each. In the rear tramped Jesse Gardner.

It was from the half-breed that Harry took his direction.

The moment came when the lad could do no more. Already he had held the front place longer than is customary. But then he was a prisoner, and expected no ordinary consideration. Reeling and stumbling, his knees hardly capable of being bent, his legs and feet like lead and barely to be wrenched from the holding snow, he held on to the last instant without complaint. Then he stopped suddenly, turning his head, and all but losing his balance with that slight movement.

"I've finished," he said curtly, just able to draw breath.

Ed. Gardner chuckled. Perhaps he felt something like admiration or respect for the lad's

stubbornness and grit ; he made no comment anyway.

"Get up, Charley," he said.

And the silent half-breed took up the trail-breaking. Harry fell in behind him and contrived to keep pace, although even the now comparatively easy walking caused him agony.

He was glad when a halt was made for mid-day meal. More glad still when, about four in the afternoon, the party halted for the day. He hobbled to his work of chopping wood—without being ordered ; but when he made ready to do the cooking the Swedish youth shoved him aside, not unkindly.

"You vos sit down," said Oleson.

"You're a white man," returned Harry gratefully ; and flopped as he stood, rolling out of Oleson's way.

The removal of his boots was a delicious agony.

To Harry's surprise, Jesse Gardner raised no opposition to the Swede's action. He sat gloomily in the tent, speaking little to anyone, not at all to Harry.

That night, Simmins, who was sleeping next to Harry, caught him by the shoulder and shook him. Looking around, Harry felt a bundle being shoved close against his face. The tent, of course, was wholly dark.

"Don't say nothin'," came a whisper in Harry's ear ; and the bundle disappeared beneath the lad's blankets.

The next morning he was wearing a pair

of moccasins. If Jesse Gardner noticed, he said nothing. But he ordered Harry to break trail as before. Thanks partly to his new footgear, the labour of this was lighter than on the previous day, but the agony of his tormented leg muscles was hardly lessened. So terrible became at times the paroxysms of pain that, in spite of the fierce cold, the perspiration gathered in beads on his forehead, to be quickly transformed into ice.

Once he was compelled to stop altogether, physically incapable of going a step further, and his will powerless to do more. As he was second in the file and sat down to remove the racquette that he might rub his cramped muscles, Ed. Gardner, following at his heels, stopped. Those behind him halted perforce.

"Them cramps is sure awful," said Ed., not unsympathetically.

But in a couple of minutes his brother came striding to the head of the train.

"What in thunder we stoppin' for?" he demanded angrily.

Ed. pointed to the prisoner, who took not the slightest heed of Jesse, the pain he was undergoing occupying the whole of his attention.

"Wal, what of it?" demanded Jesse brutally. "No call for us to stop. Mush on. He c'n stay there 'ntil judgment day if he's minded. Hit her up again, Charley."

Thus to abandon a creature, to leave him beside the trail in that desert, without hope

of food or warmth, was plain murder and nothing else. Even Ed. looked queerly at his brother.

"Cramps is awful, Jesse," he ventured. "An' if we leave him here——."

"Wal," interrupted his brother; "we ain't leavin' him here; he's leavin' himself. Let him keep up with the rest. That's his look-out. Mush on, I says; 'n' what I says goes. Reckon our health's worth some more 'n his. Walk or stop—that's his choice; but *we* does no more stoppin'. See?"

He might have been speaking of a lamed dog instead of a human being. Indeed, even an Indian would have evinced more concern over a dog than Gardner indicated. He was not so much as troubling to look at Harry while he spoke.

And Harry, listening, realised the degree of hatred that the man must have for him to be able to speak with such callous brutality. And the realisation brought with it a hot anger, a fierce desire to do unto Jesse Gardner as he deserved, a whole-hearted longing for the opportunity to mete out to the man a full retaliation for such cold-blooded heartlessness.

The man was coward as well as brute. Willing, desirous to commit murder, he sought to achieve his wish without risking the actual committal of the taking of his helpless prisoner's life. Knowing it folly, the lad was unable to check the passion of rage that swept upon him.

With a sudden movement, indifferent to the

agonising wrench between knee and ankle, he stood on his feet.

"Jesse Gardner," he shouted; and in the still, frigid atmosphere the sound of his voice, sharp and sudden, had the effect of metal striking upon metal. "Jesse Gardner, you're the meanest hound that walks this earth. And one day, I promise you, I'll make you pay in full and hard for this. You'd leave me to freeze here, would you, so that you could say you'd had no hand in killing me. I wonder you worry about so little a thing as telling a lie, you miserable coward."

It was a relief to his feelings; but for all that Harry felt ashamed that he had been so weak as to let himself go to such extent. The truer courage would have been to bear Gardner's cruelty without complaining or showing a helpless resentment that could be only a gratification to the brute.

Gardner heard him without discomposure; but there was an evil smile hanging around his hard mouth, and triumph as well as hate looked out from his eyes.

"Small kids, big words," he said sneeringly, turning about. "Mush on, Charley; 'n' no more stoppings."

Ten minutes later, when Harry, the pain relieved somewhat, caught up the outfit, he found the sledges again at a standstill. Big Oleson had fallen a victim to Harry's complaint and Martin was rubbing vigorously at his leg, the while Jesse Gardner stood by cursing the Swede.

There was small progress that day. By clenching his teeth and thinking hard of Jesse Gardner, Harry contrived to keep his pains under to the extent of being able to continue walking. But Oleson's trouble increased, and three times halts had to be made on his account. Martin and Simmins also were attacked by the cramps.

That night Oleson aroused the whole tent by a series of blood-curdling yells and shrieks of pain; and after hard rubbing had failed to do him any good, the half-breed took him in hand and doctored the leg in some queer fashion that the Indians make use of, aided by a cleft stick. But Oleson was unfit next day for either hauling or breaking trail, Harry taking his place with the sledge and working turn about with the other men at the latter operation.

In five days they had covered less than forty miles, a miserable rate of going that kept the leader in a temper of vicious moroseness from dawn to sleeping time. They were days of hard toil, bitter cold, and pain. The temperature had sunk still lower; and Harry would awaken in the night feeling the cold stealing within his blankets. The others, having warmly lined sleeping bags, were less affected.

Of the sun they saw little or nothing, except on the fourth day, when, for a while, a most curious colour effect was noticeable about the sky-line, and a wonderfully luminous and delicately beautiful veil of purple hue seemed to be floating lazily above the terrible whiteness

of the ground. Through scarlet and yellow shields glowed a well-defined example of those queer phenomena known as sun dogs, the cause of which appears to be the reflection of light through frozen snow crystals in suspension in the air.

Charley drew Jesse Gardner's attention to this, shaking his head.

"Bad sign. Big snow," he said warningly.

"When's it coming?" he was asked.

"Soon; quick. Any time," he replied.

"Then we got t' get a wiggle on us, boys," Gardner told the others. "Won't be good t' be caught in th' open if th' snow comes real bad, as th' breed seems t' think. Mush on."

During early afternoon a little snow did indeed come, but lasting only a few minutes. With it arrived a wind, not strong, but with an edge sharpened to razor keenness on the icy grindstone of the North Pole.

The party made desperate efforts to hurry on, taking the turns at breaking trail for only brief spells, hoping to gain the shelter of a wood before the anticipated storm fell.

Fortune, however, seemed against them. Perhaps because of the fierce haste they made, came a succession of minor mishaps, each of which spelled delay. A tumpline broke; several times one or other of the sledges was overturned, scattering its load abroad.

When the sun showed itself about three in the afternoon, Charley, who was leading, came to an abrupt halt, and on Ed. Gardner enquiring

the reason, he pointed out a well-defined trail their own would cross at an acute angle.

From the rear Jesse Gardner came hurrying to take part in the consultation, and he gave full vent to the anger and suspicion provoked by this conclusive evidence that the region was not the untenanted waste it had been hoped.

"If it's them police——" he began, with a menacing glance at Harry.

The half-breed interrupted, shaking his head.

"Indian; not white man's shoe," he declared.

"Then if we're near th' Lake, as we oughter be, an' if what you says is correct 'bout th' Indians, it oughtn't to matter; they won't be hangin' araound for long," observed Gardner.

"Two—four men, that all," returned Charley. "Not whole tribe. Come from there, go there," and he pointed successively from the south-west to the north-east. "Don't like;" and he again shook his head.

"An' if they is Indians, what's it matter?" Ed. Gardner asked. "Don't concern us."

His brother pointed out that it did concern them, a whole lot, too, should it happen that the trail had been made by Indians of the tribe about Fort Scott.

"It's th' direction they'd be comin' from."

"But why sh'd they be goin' north, cap?" ventured Simmins.

"Ask 'em when ye meets up with 'em," answered the leader sarcastically. "I'm not wantin' to."

"There's only four, 'cordin' to Charley,"

pointed out Ed. "Indians on th' move gen'ally keeps blame close together. Reckon they's jus' trappin'—Indians from about here."

"Yes, 'n' when they sees our tracks, blame curious as th' red swines always are, they'll find out where we are; 'n' that means th' police."

"I don't think you need worry about that," Harry put in. "There'll be no tracks to see before long, I guess;" and he pointed to the sky.

"Ugh! big snow," grunted Charley, also looking.

Ultimately it was decided that the party should hold on to its direction, but making a slight turn more westerly. This would take them farther away from the supposed Indian trail. The latter, Charley was of opinion, was not of recent origin, although men had passed along it early that day. He also believed, from the fact that the trail had been in use both ways, that one end of it, though he could not say which end, finished up at a camp.

Harry's weather wisdom proved correct. Within a few minutes of the re-start, a sudden puff of wind came, bringing with it a flurry of snow lasting a few seconds. The air cleared; then, after a minute's interval, came another flurry of soft, large flakes.

"Hit her up, boys," encouraged Gardner, coming up and taking place at the head of the train. "There's tall timber yonder; and if we make that, reckon we c'n laugh at all th' snow between now 'n' th' North Pole. Mush on, boys; it's our chance."

He fell to work furiously, sending the light, newly fallen snow flying like a cloud of foam as he plunged and ploughed along. But in a little while he was exhausted by the violence of his own exertions ; gasping and choking, tiny icicles clinging to his beard and eyebrows, he had to give place to his brother, and fell to the rear.

Then Harry, and after him the half-breed, went to the head, to stay there until temporarily exhausted. And the party made progress ; but the progress was towards the impending snow-storm the wind was driving to meet them. From small gusts, it had settled down into a steady blow ; and the distance to the wood was not a quarter covered when the snow came in dead earnest.

Blinding it was ; great solid flakes that coalesced while in the act of falling ; flakes that fell so fast and so thickly that they formed a veritable white wall through which it was impossible to see.

"Hurry, for th' love of Mike ; hurry !" yelled Jesse Gardner's muffled voice.

But there was no need to spur the men on. Each knew for himself the danger of delay, and was working up to his top limit.

Cruel work it was. The snow-filled atmosphere seemed too thick to be breathed. The intense physical exertion they were forced to make was too severe except for gasping and gulping air in at the mouth, and the awful iciness made the lungs feel numbed with every gulp. Panting, sobbing, choking, they toiled forward.

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As for direction, none troubled about it except the leader at the moment, and his choice could be but guess work. The rest thought but of keeping in touch, each with the man ahead of him. Nor was that easy. Sound helped—more than sight, even, unless a laggard gave opportunity for the fellow behind to stumble over the rear of his sledge, at risk of a broken ankle. A blur, a mere shadow, was all that the figure of the man in front showed, and as such but infrequently. Men could not see their own feet.

It was a nightmare—a horror to which no words can do bare justice. It was like a ghastly dream, such as men pray to forget ; but those who endured it, with the lungs protesting in painful gasps, heart pounding and thumping as if it would burst, legs like lead, and every muscle of the body strained and aching, knew it for a frightful reality.

Men reeled and stumbled in that horrible race, fearful of stopping because each knew that if he fell there would be no help for him from his fellows. There were collisions and trippings, fierce, if inaudible cursings upon slowness or clumsiness, weakly-sobbed threats if anyone gave sign of hindering the progress of the rest. To halt meant death.

Yet to halt now and again, though only for a few moments, they were compelled. Flesh and blood could not bear the drain of wholly continuous physical straining of such intensity. When the leader stopped, all had to do likewise,

grateful for the brief respite, yet, with the stupidity of terror, anathematising the cause of the stoppage.

How long that mad contest with time and the elements continued, none of the men could have said. To each it seemed an eternity—an eternity of ferocious, hopeless effort.

During one of the imperative, all-too-short halts came a lessening of the falling snow. When the head of the train again got on the move, there was a stoppage in the middle. One man—Simmins, Harry believed—stood stock still, leaning forward, prevented from falling by the long staff against which he had propped himself. Oleson, just in front of Harry and immediately behind the obstructor, bellowed to him to go on. But the man did not move. The cold, the exhaustion from over-effort, had dulled his senses, thrown him into a state of partial coma. He remained deaf to the big Swede's furious objurgations.

His patience exhausted, Oleson left his place, stumbled forward, and deliberately struck the man, hurling him aside from the trail. With a shout of savage triumph Oleson snatched up his own rope and continued.

"Get on! Get on!" was bellowed at Harry from behind.

Oaths and threats were added, but to leave Simmins—if it were he—was more than Harry could stomach. The man lay where he had been thrown, apparently incapable of movement; to pass on was to abandon him to certain death.

Heedless of the frantic cries that followed him, Harry went forward, picked the man up and set him upon his feet.

"Forward, man! Get on!" he roared, shaking and punching the inert, swaying figure, until the blows must have aroused some spark of animation in the dulled brain, revived the failing will sufficiently for it to be able to resume some kind of authority over the miserable flesh.

A few weak forward steps were contrived, and they continued in response to incessant application of Harry's fist in the poor creature's back. Thus goaded into movement, automatic rather than self-directed, the man proceeded, allowing the rest of the train to continue.

"You hold us up again, for *anything*, 'n' by th' livin' thunder I'll brain ye," Jesse Gardner said to Harry, when the fore-end of the train was picked up at the next stopping place.

Harry ignored the threat. He was attending to the man he had saved, and whom, remembering the incident of the moccasins, he was pleased to find was Simmins. Besides, the indulgence of personal hostility and bad feeling amid such surroundings was farcical.

By accident, re-arrangement of the train upon the re-start brought Harry to the rear end, and, as he picked up the tumbline, Jesse Gardner, falling in behind him, spoke again.

"You get stoppin' again, 'n' you stays there," he said warningly.

Once more heads were thrown forward and shoulders bent to the awful work. The snow

was less thick, but the wind was higher, whirling the flakes in blinding clouds, and making still more difficult the painful effort of breathing. Every step had to be literally fought for.

All at once Harry felt the point of his right snowshoe in sharp collision with some hard object. The shock threw him forward ; he had a vague, blurred vision of a man's figure as he made a frantic effort to maintain his equilibrium, failed, stumbled again, twisted over helplessly sideways as the strained tumpline slipped, and came down headlong in the snow. He felt something strike his head—and then oblivion.

Ignorant of what his momentary stoppage had brought about, the man in front—it was Martin—went on. Jesse Gardner, the last man in the line, saw Harry Revell's fall and, before he could save himself, tripped over the back of Harry's sledge.

There was a cry, unheard, as Gardner shot forward a-sprawl upon the sledge. As he rolled to the side of the load, his clutching fingers seized and gripped like death upon a projecting corner. In another instant he had hauled himself upright, unhurt.

Then he stooped for the line, glancing sideways at the motionless figure partly buried in the unbroken snow beside the trail.

"Good riddance," he muttered, as he threw his weight upon the sledge rope and passed forward.

CHAPTER XVIII

SAVED FROM DEATH

For how long Harry Revell lay insensible he could have no knowledge. His brain slowly resumed its faculties as the effects of the blow upon his forehead passed away, and the chilled blood crept back from the heart, bringing reanimation to his body.

Apart from a dull aching in his head, he was feeling wholly comfortable. He was not cold; he did not wish to move. His brain suggested no reason why he should move.

He was lying face downwards in the snow, forehead resting on his forearm, and his breath had melted the snow about his mouth, forming a little pit. He had no sensation of bodily fatigue; the aching of his over-fatigued muscles, which had been such an agony while he was marching, had passed away. As with a little child disturbed in its peaceful slumber, his eyelids slowly drooped and he snuggled deeper into his white bed.

The moment following, his eyes opened again. He felt annoyed. The movement made, slight as it had been, had caused him a sharp and disagreeable pain in his forehead. He shifted his head irritably; the pain increased, stimulating his brain into immediate action.

A further movement of his head brought increase of the pain, and he turned himself, sitting up, irritably curious as to the cause

of this interference with his comfort. He put the palm of his glove to his forehead, and on the leather found a moist patch.

Thoroughly aroused, but still incomprehending, he contrived to stand upright, but only after severe and painful struggling were his stiffening limbs forced into action. For some seconds he stared blankly around. Then, with a rush, came understanding. He remembered what he had been doing just before he had fallen so abruptly asleep.

He re-called the collision, the stumble, the blow that had robbed him of consciousness. Yet it was the blow that had saved his life. The wooden backrail of the sledge on which his forehead had struck had caused an ugly gash; and it was the trickling of the blood, the irritation of the raw surface of the wound by his jacket, had prevented him from remaining in a sleep from which, otherwise, there had been no awakening.

And yet it might be questioned whether his return to life were a blessing. Alone in that snow desert, with nothing so far as the eye could reach—the snow had ceased—but a dead white waste, destitute of food, many an one, hopeless of succour, where succour there was none, would have deemed himself the luckier never to have been aroused from that painless, dreamless unconsciousness during which life would have glided insensibly into death. To be alive was to be called upon to suffer the agonies of cold and hunger.

Harry Revell, however, was not of the breed to admit such dismal thought. Never to him would come the doubt that while life existed hope remained. His was the practical mind which concerns itself with things as they are rather than as they might or ought to be. Certainly, imagination was not denied him, but it was tempered by a strong commonsense. And, best of all, he was equipped with a full share of that pigheaded stubbornness of the Englishman which refuses to admit the bare possibility of defeat, whether the enemy be a human one or of the elements.

Again and again has it been said of the English that they fight best when things are at their worst; that the best of them is not revealed until their backs are up against the wall; that they can never be beaten simply because they are unable to realise when they are defeated. And in this there is no jot of exaggeration. True, the English blood has no monopoly of this species of courage, but it is none the less the fact that this quality is the common heritage of the English, whereas amongst other races it does not occur as the rule.

Without despair or excitement, Harry Revell rapidly considered his situation and made up his mind what was best to do. The obvious course was to follow the trail of the vanished party. Much snow had fallen since he had been left behind, but the trail was still to be detected.

Following it, however, was more easily settled upon than accomplished.

In the first place, within ten seconds Harry made the disagreeable discovery that his right shoe had by some means been broken when he fell and rendered practically useless. Trouble number one.

Then his feet sank easily through the thick covering of snow that had fallen upon the trail ; and every time he tried to lift his foot he was required to lift also the additional weight of the mass of soft snow that persisted in clinging to it. And that is ill for an exhausted walker, one who has not eaten for many hours, and from whose legs the cramps have not entirely departed.

He had not been floundering through the snow for longer than a quarter of an hour when a fit of pain took him so violently that it was impossible to continue. He was forced to sit down in the snow and rub his legs.

It was of no use going on, he decided. To rest was imperative.

But where ?

On all sides one saw but the snow, apparently smooth as a table, though in reality the open face of the land was diversified by the scallops of wind-blows, and, occasionally, by long lines marking where an extensive drift had been checked by an uprise of the surface. A few scattered bushes thrust their bare stems up from beneath the thick garment overlying them, and here and there were to be seen a few trees.

Right there in the open he must camp, if at

all, and the prospect was no inviting one. To the tenderfoot it would have seemed as if there were nothing else to be done but crouch in the snow, with a first-class opportunity of being frozen to death before morning. But Harry knew otherwise.

Turning off the trail, in ten minutes he had floundered a way to the nearest drift of a depth he judged sufficient. Behind the drift was a sprinkling of timber. Here were a sleeping place and a fire. For food he would have to rely upon the memory of the last meal and hope for the next.

Removing the broken snowshoe, he set to work with it, digging into the deepest part of the drift and hollowing out at the bottom until he had excavated a very passable snowhouse. With the same tool he cleared away the soft snow around the entrance to the burrow, forming it into a low wall, and packing it firm. The ground he beat and trampled firm.

Then he dragged himself towards the trees, a glance at the sky warning him of the need of haste. His axe was still with him, and he succeeded in hacking down a small dead birch. The bigger trees he was unable to fell, and he lacked the strength to climb them to the dead wood he could see above in tantalising abundance. Some of the bushes he uncovered and chopped away.

Matches, of course, he had ; and, already warmed somewhat by his exertions, he knelt down to attempt to kindle a fire. Carefully

he fed and cherished the tiny flame until the smaller of the sloping sticks about it were well alight. Then more wood was piled on ; and oh the joy with which he huddled about the pile, absorbing the gathering warmth !

Darkness had fallen ; and, fearful of toppling into the fire if he allowed himself to stay longer, he wrenched himself away from the cheerful blaze and crawled into the snow excavation. There, no sooner was he well inside, than he was asleep, drugged with physical fatigue, indifferent to the chilliness of his sleeping chamber, to the pains of hunger—even to the sharp stabs and wrenches of torment afflicting his legs.

It was little after dawn when he awakened, shivering with the deadly cold, stiff, cramped, and aching in every part of his body. Feet foremost, he shoved himself into the open, to find the fire dead. Fortunately, there was no snow. The sky was clear, and the wind had vanished.

To re-kindle the fire was Harry's first task. So cold was he that even hunger was forgotten for the time being. Which was as well ; for fire was possible, whereas breakfast was not even a hope.

When sufficiently thawed out, he set to work to effect some kind of repair of his damaged snow-shoe ; and, this accomplished, he found and followed the trail of the vanished outfit.

It was cruel work, bad enough for one whose last meal was not twenty-four hours behind, but Harry stuck to it doggedly. There was

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nothing else to do except lie down and die, and that was a conclusion to be reached only when strength failed utterly and to go forward was wholly impossible.

Forward lay his sole hope of escape from death. If he could not succeed in catching up the party—and it was a mighty big if—that hope would fail.

The sun gave light, but no warmth ; and the fierce effort of lifting his feet from the soft snow threatened renewal of the cramps, but Harry held on. He did not make the mistake of trying to hasten ; but, head bent, plodded and floundered along until perhaps a couple of miles had been covered.

And still the trail held forward, with never a sign of the looked-for wood of which the half-breed had spoken, until Harry began to marvel at the strength and persistence of his late companions in their struggle against the snowstorm.

His hunger was now ravenous. Pains gripped him, shooting up through his chest. He began to feel himself lightheaded ; his steps grew feeble and wandering. More than once he found himself off the trail and over knee-deep in the snow, whence he had difficulty in finding the strength to extricate himself.

For more than half the time his eyes were closed. He felt himself growing weaker. His lips were dry and parched ; his throat burned. Yet he kept sufficient grip on himself to abstain from trying to relieve the torment by eating snow.

Suddenly he stumbled, pitched forward, and opened his eyes to find himself lying upon a big hummock right across the trail. And—glorious sight!—barely half a mile distant, he could descry an outskirt of timber, the outlying fringe of the wood of which Charley had told.

Hope revived, and with it came access of strength; it lessened the fierce insistence of the hunger pains, the smarting of his parched and cracking lips.

“Thank Heaven!” he ejaculated fervently.

In or about that wood he would find the party. Surely it would be so. Experience would suggest the wisdom of a prolonged rest after the awful nerve and body-trying struggle against the snow-storm; and hope gave corroboration. Within the timber yonder was a camp, with food and fire; and even Jesse Gardner would not be callous enough to deny him. It was a voluntary return to captivity that he was making, but the alternative was certain death.

Without loss of time he began to scramble over the obstruction lying across the trail; but his foot slipped, and his fingers, digging into the mass to secure him against a fall, slipped under and clinched upon a rope.

The discovery pulled him up short. For the first time occurred to him the oddity of finding across the trail made by his party such a lengthy, breast-high obstacle. Had it been there when the sledges went along they must have gone around it.

Wondering, he began to scrape away the covering of snow, quickly revealing a breadth of roped canvas.

And then he jumped. The obstacle was, beyond all doubt, one of the sledges of the goldseekers—the last in the train, abandoned by its hauler, his strength having failed.

Quick came a second discovery. Stepping around to the head of the abandoned sledge, which had been slewed across the track, Harry trod on something firm and solid, but that gave slightly to his weight. In an instant he had stooped down, to find, as he had missed up to the moment, a two-foot-high ridge above the snow and of a length suggesting the body of a man.

Within a minute he had satisfied himself that the hauler of the sledge, so far from abandoning his load, was lying beside it—had been lying there since the afternoon before.

“Poor wretch!” the lad exclaimed. “And with safety in sight!”

It was indeed bitter that, with the goal at hand, exhaustion and the cold should have claimed their victim.

Face downwards on the snow the unhappy wretch had fallen; and although it was beyond all doubt that he must have succumbed, it was with feverish haste Harry worked to clear away the white drift and loosen the stiff form of what had once been a man from the frozen embrace of the snow. Wrenching at the body, he laid it face upwards. Then he jumped back with a cry.



"HE JUMPED BACK WITH A CRY."

The man was Jesse Gardner.

For five seconds he stood staring ; then, seized by an unreasonable impulse, he flung himself on his knees beside the body, whipped off his glove, and forced his hand within the many coverings of the chest.

Warmth ! By Jove, yes ; his fingers, chilled as they were, could detect the barest sensation. Incredible as it might be, the man was not yet dead.

It was incredible ; it was beyond all reason ; but at such crises one does not stop to reason, to obey the dictates of the understanding. Snatching at the body, Harry lifted it to the feet, hoisted it upon his shoulder, and stepped out firmly along the trail.

How he did it, from where came the strength enabling him to carry his burden to where the trail ended in a broad and trampled clearing within the edge of the wood, Harry could never explain. Ready to drop in his tracks from sheer exhaustion as he had been ten minutes earlier, from some inner source he drew the energy capable of sustaining him in that terrible effort, accomplished without a fall or a stumble.

Gasping for breath, but steady of foot and firm of hand, even without a halt, he slowly and steadily covered those eight hundred yards until he was able to deposit his burden beside the still warm embers of a fire.

It was a passage of which his memory retained no clear recollection ; there was no imprint. Mind and will were bent to the

single effort ; they had naught to do with anything outside it. He did not wonder how it came about that, Jesse Gardner's absence being noted, none of the party had gone to seek him. He was not even concerned that, near to the fire, he saw nothing of the party. Their non-appearance did not even occur to him, convinced though he had been that the men must be in the wood.

Purposefully he set about the gathering of wood—and there was dead wood in plenty ; a heap lay close at hand. In a very little while he had a brisk blaze going. Then he took burning brands and started two more fires, at the points of a rough triangle, the body of Gardner lying within. He was careful not to make these too large.

This done, he began to work systematically at the attempt to restore the frozen man to life.

And how he worked ! He no longer felt hunger. His exertions and the warmth about him brought the perspiration upon his skin. Opening the man's garments, he fell to rubbing the body until the monotonous persistence of his movements brought himself into a condition of almost self-hypnotism. The face, the feet and hands, which he uncovered, anticipating frostbite, he rubbed with handfuls of the dry, crumbly snow.

His fingers, hands, and wrists grew numb with rubbing, devoid of all feeling. He went on rubbing. He rubbed until he felt the stiffened tissue relax and soften under the ministration ;

and, though such was poor encouragement, if any encouragement at all, it was sufficient to cause Harry to continue.

For a couple of hours he worked without cessation, refusing to give up hope.

Mind, body, and soul were centred upon the task. He was conscious of feeling neither hope nor doubt. There was but a single point to his intelligence—the saving of Jesse Gardner.

The man just had to be saved. He was going to do it.

Twice he had to desist to fetch more fuel, but the breaks were but for a few seconds. Then to work again, until the face of Gardner appeared to be dancing backwards and forwards, with a thin veil between it and his own straining eyes.

It came as no surprise when the light pressure of his fingers brought actual proof that his baseless assurance of ultimate success was being justified. There was a distinct stirring of the man's heart.

A while longer Harry continued. Then he covered the body over, built up the fires, and started back for the sledge. There was food packed on that sledge; he knew it. The end sledge of the train, he had seen it loaded. Could he get food into Jesse Gardner, the man's revivification would be completed.

With his axe Harry chopped the hardened snow from about the runners, but the first attempt proved his strength was insufficient for him to drag the sledge to the wood.

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Very well, he must make more than one journey.

His fingers were glowing, and, in spite of the cold, they manipulated the knots without recourse to the axe. The lashings untied, Harry cast half the contents of the sledge upon the snow and again tested his power. It was sufficient; the sledge began to move.

A fry-pan was the only cooking utensil he found, but it was made to serve. In it he melted snow, added grease, and part of the contents of a tin of meat; the whole was thickened with a little flour, a partly emptied sack of which, with some cases of tinned food, comprised the bulk of the sledge's load.

While the soup was cooking, Harry cleared the sledge, went back, and piled on the truck left on the trail. Also he brought the sheet of canvas that had covered the load. He wanted that canvas.

With a spoon, carried in one of his pockets, he tested the soup and pronounced it ready. But that mouthful restored to him sudden realisation of his own ravening need for food, completely forgotten until that moment.

In a trice, the spoon was again inserted and its contents tipped into his own mouth. The taste was glorious, exquisite; it threw him into a delirium. Whipping up the pan, he was about to plunge the spoon into it again, but stopped. A shiver went through him and he groaned.

Then, replacing the fry-pan on the embers,

he drew Gardner's shoulders closer to the fire, lifted the head, and began to put spoonfuls of the soup between the lips.

The treatment showed prompt result. The throat muscles contracted, the eyelids quivered, were raised, and Jesse Gardner looked at his preserver, but without recognition.

"Keep at it. You're all right now," Harry said encouragingly.

A few more spoonfuls went down; and then Harry could bear the aggravation no longer. A shovel had been included in the second load he had brought up. On this he made and cooked gillette, and, unable to wait until it was properly cooked, cut strips from it with his knife, dipped them in the soup, and so fed himself until the raw edge of his fierce hunger was slightly blunted. He had sufficient self-control to go no further for the time being.

Then he again turned his attention to Gardner, who was beginning to show unequivocal evidence of returning to life. He was able to swallow with less difficulty—even to compass some movement of his hands.

Filling up and leaving the fry-pan on the fire, Harry chopped down several small trees, chopped holes in the ground for their insertion, and with the canvas sheet contrived an apology for a tent. The ground within he cleared of snow and covered with green boughs. Some of the store of food he carried inside, piling it along the canvas walls. More wood was cut down, and Gardner, wrapped in a couple of

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blankets, having been dragged within the tent, Harry built up the fire nearest to the mouth of the tent into an enormous blaze. At intervals during this work he would leave off, to feed his patient and himself with small quantities of the soup.

He was kneeling by the fire, attending to the fry-pan, when a sudden lurch forward that left him with a scorched face and a burned hand, warned him that he had come to his physical limit. On hands and knees he crawled to the tent, pulled to the makeshift flap, and, snuggling close to the man whom he had dragged back from death as a return for his own abandonment in the snow, he instantly fell asleep, thoroughly played out.

Outside, the fire blazed and crackled, its long tongues of flame lessening with the down-going of the pale sun, until as the gloom of night obscured the cold whiteness of the landscape no more than a spread of dull crimson embers remained. And then the stars came out ; and above the tree tops the moon looked down into the clearing, throwing dead straight shadows like inked bars.

And within the tent slept two so peacefully and without movement they seemed already to have slipped back into the Dark Valley, from the shadows of which they had returned by reason of the dogged intention of one of them to win out.

CHAPTER XIX

HARRY MAKES UP HIS MIND

A luminous golden glow on the wall of the tent met Harry's eyes as they opened next morning—sign that the sun was already well up and that the snow, the enemy he most dreaded, was still holding off. He was cold, and the stiffness of his lower limbs caused him to totter as he made for the tent flap, and, pulling it aside, stepped out ; but both chilliness and stiffness lessened as he stamped around, quickening the blood circulation.

His tremendous exertions of the day before seemed to have left no bad effects, while, unlike the previous morning, the prospect ahead was thoroughly cheerful. He had shelter, and food in plenty, and possession of the latter means everything in the wintry nor'-west.

He whistled as he plied his axe upon the dead wood : he sang as the first timorous flame of the kindled fire leaped upward. Oh ! it was surely good to be alive.

Leaving the fry-pan with its hotch-potch of sizzling contents diffusing an appetizing aroma, Harry stepped within the tent to see how his patient was faring.

Jesse Gardner was awake, lying on his back, staring blankly at the canvas roof. He took no notice of the lad looking at him attentively, apparently unaware of his presence until he spoke.

"Well, how goes it?" asked Harry cheerfully.

Gardner's eyes, dull and bloodshot, came down to his face and rested there without expression. Plainly the man did not recognise him. But when the question was repeated, Gardner shivered.

"I'm cold," he muttered fretfully.

"Sure you are; but I reckon we can soon remedy that," Harry said. "How does the idea of grub strike you? Come along!"

He unrolled the blankets, pushed his arms gently under Gardner's thighs and shoulders, and exerting that nervous, wiry strength of which his comparative slimness gave so scant a suggestion, he heaved the man up close to his breast, and carried him outside, feet foremost.

Seating the man by the fire, his back propped by the sledge placed on its side, Harry set to work to feed him with the soup. But Gardner pushed the spoon away after a few spoonfuls.

"Drink," he demanded huskily.

"Sorry there's no tea. I can't find any," Harry informed him. "See if you can do anything with this."

And he put to Gardner's lips a meat tin filled with hot water in which a little flour had been stirred, with a liberal sweetening from a small bag of sugar discovered in one of the sacks.

"He's better—decidedly," thought Harry. "Be himself, I reckon, mighty soon."

For Gardner had clutched the tin with both hands and swallowed greedily at the compound.

"More!" he said.

"Well, I reckon it can't do you much harm, anyway," said the lad, ramming snow into the tin and setting it against the fire.

"Have a turn at the other stuff while it's making," he advised; and Gardner fell in with the suggestion.

By the time Harry had ended his own breakfast of half charred bannock and stew, Gardner had contrived a respectable meal; but his knowledge of the lad seemed as vague and impersonal as before.

He still was weak; and Harry feared the freezing of his extremities had left serious results, his own hard rubbing and use of snow notwithstanding. Gardner now moved his arms freely enough, but his lower limbs remained inert.

"I'm going to put you back in the tent again," Harry told him, when they were through. "Guess you'll be all right while I go scouting around a bit. But don't try moving. If you happen to want me, just cut loose; I shall hear all right;" and he laid within reach of the blanketed man his six-shooter.

Wearing Gardner's snow-shoes, Harry started from the camp. He was feeling very curious, and hoped to come upon something to explain the evidently hurried leaving of their camp by the rest of the party. Four, at least, were thoroughly experienced men, and wanting no advice as to the explanation of their leader's absence, even although sheer physical exhaustion had kept them from going to seek him after the halt by the wood had revealed his disappearance.

It was incomprehensible that Gardner's loss should have been so complacently accepted. Even had the rest been anxious to push on without loss of time, it was unthinkable that Ed. Gardner should have readily agreed to abandon search for his brother's body.

Yet it was clear that such had taken place. Harry wanted to know the reason.

Their out trail from the wood he found readily, and his picking up from the snow within fifty yards of the wood of a large canister containing tea, and a tin mug, on both of which he pounced eagerly, convinced Harry that the departure must have been made in a violent hurry induced by circumstances strongly suggestive of apprehension. But what were those circumstances?

Instead of keeping on past the wood, the trail swung away towards the north-west—almost at a right angle to the wood. Harry followed it for nearly half a mile before turning back. Then he went for a considerable distance around the northern boundary of the wood, which seemed to cover a great area, but came upon nothing providing an explanation. The unsullied, untrodden snow stretched away from the timber as far as the eye could reach.

Returning, Harry scouted along the southern edge, and had not proceeded fifty feet before coming upon a fresh trail. This was interesting, proving that the wood had held, perhaps still held, at least one other traveller.

Stooping, Harry examined the tracks care-

fully. The absence of any covering of the tracks with snow proved that the wayfarer must have come to the cluster of bushes and small trees, at which the trail ended, some time subsequent to the ceasing of the storm. From this cluster it was easy to see and likewise to be seen from the clearing where the goldseekers had passed the night.

The information gained from the tracks was interesting. So far as Harry could tell, there had been two persons ; one he judged as taller and heavier than the other by reason of a greater length of stride and a deeper indentation through the crust. The shoes, too, were of a different pattern from those used by any of the Klondikers. They came to a more blunt point than these, and were marked by a peculiar curve or swell that to Harry's eyes was sufficiently distinctive.

"Indians," Harry told himself with conviction.

Here, then, was the explanation of the hurried get-away. And yet it was difficult to comprehend that the sight of a couple of Indians had so scared the party that the brother of the lost man had been willing to abandon any search for his body.

Had there been an actual attack ?

- Harry did not believe so, though he made search amongst the tree trunks about the clearing for marks of possible bullets. So far as he could reconstruct what had taken place, the two Indians had come around the spur of

timber and halted dead at the sight of the tenanted clearing. He thought it likely this had happened shortly after dawn. Perhaps one of the goldseekers had been about, ready to get the fire started. Accident had drawn his eyes to the watching Red men, and at once he had aroused his companions. Struck by some unreasoning and overwhelming panic, they had at once packed up and departed, not waiting even to prepare food.

"Now what," Harry asked himself, "could have produced such overpowering fear?"

Sure, they were anxious enough to keep their presence in the region from the knowledge of possible wandering Indians, fearing betrayal by the Red men to the police; but Harry found it impossible to admit this anxiety as a reason sufficient to explain the abandoning of Jesse Gardner. Great as might be the party's real fear of the police, the men's boasting talk notwithstanding, this readiness to leave their leader behind, not knowing and not caring if he were alive or dead, simply because a couple of Indians had become aware of them, was more than Harry Revell could stomach. He found the explanation too feeble for acceptance. Simmins and Martin might be timorous; they might even dislike Jesse Gardner, as well as go in fear of him; the Scandinavian might be indifferent; but neither Ed. Gardner nor the half-breed was a timorous man. The former, in particular, was wordy and blustering; and, backed by Charley, as undoubtedly he would have been,

he would surely have succeeded in overcoming any objections raised by the other three when the fate of his own brother hung in the balance. Yet, so far as might be conjectured, Ed. Gardner had been as willing as the rest to make a precipitate escape.

The puzzle was too much to solve. A trip along the trail left by the two Indians gave no assistance, though Harry did not extend it beyond a few hundred yards, keeping his eyes skinned the while, not forgetting to include the fringe of timber, from which the trail kept a fairly equal distance all the way so far as he went, under his observations.

He returned to the tent still wondering, his one definite conclusion being that the Indians (he could not believe these were limited to two) who had scared the Klondikers into hurried retreat were still camped in or close to the wood.

As soon as he saw Jesse Gardner he regretted having been away so long. The man's eyes were bright with fever, and he was lying on his back, the blankets tossed aside, head rolling from side to side, and he was chattering deliriously.

The sight of Harry at once aggravated his craziness. His movements became more violent ; his voice rose ; and an expression of fear and horror flashed into his eyes.

Oddly enough, recognition of his preserver, which had been absent until now, had returned to him in this state of mental excitement.

"It's Revell ; th' kid from th' fort," he

shouted, throwing himself about wildly. "But yer dead. I saw ye fall in th' snow 'side th' trail, 'n' I went on, hopin' ye'd die. 'N' now ye've come back t' torment me. Go away; f'r th' love o' Mike get out 'n' leave me or I'll go mad."

He flung himself from side to side, dashed from Harry's hand the tin can of snow water he brought, and acted so violently that the lad, believing he was doing harm by staying, went out of the tent.

For an hour and more the fit continued, Harry an unhappy listener to a yelling tirade against himself, the Indians, the ill luck that had interrupted the journey into the Yukon, mingled with the most awful threats of vengeance against those who had obstructed the carrying out of the project.

To his relief, the paroxysm at last concluded; the raucous, strident voice died away to a pitiful whimpering; and, entering the tent, he found Gardner lying quiet, although trembling violently. His eyes were closed; and, when Harry spoke to him, he complained, weakly but in a rational voice, of acute body pains.

The only medicine at Harry's disposal was hot water; and this, with dried prunes steeped in it, he fed to the wretched man at frequent intervals until, the pain probably relieved, Gardner dropped into an uneasy sleep.

Going outside, Harry cooked himself a meal, with the added luxury of a pannikin of strong tea, and, while his knees roasted and the cold

chilled his back, tried to think out what was best for him to do.

There was no getting away from the fact that the presence of Jesse Gardner mightily complicated an already uncertain situation. Providence had saved his life, bestowed on him food and a sledge, but even though alone, Harry had doubts as to the wisdom of attempting to find his way back to the fort. With the companion that had accompanied the gifts of Providence, he could not consider the notion as anything but impossible. For him, anyway. True, it had been done. He did not forget the yarn a constable of the N. W. M. Police had told him of a comrade who had taken a lunatic Indian a five hundred mile trip down to Fort Chipewyan during midwinter. But then the policeman had had dogs, and, as the teller of the story had added, was almost a lunatic himself by the time the police post was reached.

Harry would have only his own strength to rely upon for dragging the sledge; and, whereas the constable had had something of a trail to follow, himself would have none. To wander with a madman in that vast untravelled desert, with an ever diminishing supply of food, with the temperature steadily falling until anything between twenty and fifty below zero might be confidently looked for, was a prospect from which the soul of the lad shrank, hardy though his body was and strong his sense of duty.

No, that notion must be given up.

Of his present whereabouts he had only a vague idea ; but he did know that if he continued going north, sooner or later he must hit the Mackenzie ; then, by turning westward, it would be possible to go on to Fort Selkirk.

That seemed the wisest course to pursue. If he succeeded, and it happened that the Company took a view different from his, well, he must put up with the consequences. He had tried his best ; he would go on trying his best to do that which his judgment told him was right. If the Chief Factor thought otherwise, it would be his, Harry Revell's, misfortune.

But go north while Gardner remained in his present state he would not. He believed the man's madness to be only temporary, induced by the terrible experience he had gone through, the fever a possible result of his own injudicious feeding of the man. But so soon as Gardner recovered he would be ready. If the American refused, knowing what was in store when the Company's post was reached, then he must be forced to do as required. Harry was the master of the means of compelling obedience, and he would not scruple to exact the same. The man must be handed over to justice to receive the punishment he had earned.

It was not pleasant to think of the man lying a few yards away, bereft of his wits ; Harry had sympathy for him in his suffering. But at the same time he was not forgetting the mischief Jesse Gardner was responsible for.

And to that Harry made up his mind. As soon as Gardner was fit to travel, they would continue north. The Mackenzie was some distance away—two hundred miles, perhaps; to get there would be a matter of time; but the big river was not to be overlooked. They would come to it all right. Meanwhile, he had to stay with Jesse Gardner and get the man well.

Having come to this conclusion, and feeling much satisfied and comforted thereat, Harry raised his head and discovered himself the object of the steadfast observation of an Indian standing partly concealed by the stem of a large spruce, a dozen feet into the wood from the edge of the clearing.

CHAPTER XX

BIG CHIEF OLD MAN

Harry's first emotion was astonishment, his next was annoyance—with himself, for his want of prudence in failing to keep a good look-out. True, he had no evidence that the Red man's intentions were hostile; the only reason for such a suspicion could be the expeditious departure of the Gardner outfit; but he had the disagreeable impression that, if there was any game to be played between himself and the red denizens of the Trout Lake region (not the most friendly to white men, if Charley was to be believed), they had scored the opening move.

Hand ready to his hip, he sprang to his feet and ran forward towards the Indian. The bronze face at once disappeared, and Harry had a glimpse of a side and one leg as the owner slipped noiselessly between the tree trunks. Before Harry was well across the clearing and at the edge of the timber, the Red man had wholly vanished.

Harry returned promptly to the fire. He could see neither sense nor advantage in taking up a chase through the wood. But although his attention was immediately distracted by Gardner's voice calling weakly from the tent, and he at once went inside, the Indian was not forgotten.

Gardner was plainly better ; the vivid brightness of fever had left his eyes ; once again he seemed quite rational, but his knowledge of Harry had stayed with him.

" You ! " he exclaimed feebly as Harry knelt by him, and there was genuine surprise depicted in his face. " How did I get here, mister ? "

" Picked you up from where you'd been lying all night in the snow and brought you here, " Harry replied cheerfully. " Feeling better ? "

" Sure. I'm feelin' plumb empty 'n' weak as a baby, but I guess I'm O.K. " His eyes closed ; but after a few seconds they opened again. " Allowed you was dead, " he said.

" I wasn't far off, " returned Harry, with grim recollection. " But I pulled through all right. Keep still, and I'll rustle some grub. "

A concoction was simmering in the fry-pan, and Harry poured the liquid part into the pannikin, crumbling into it a bit of bannock. This Gardner despatched, greedily, and asked for more, but Harry shook his head.

" Don't want the fever back again, " he declared. " But I'll fetch you something else along in a couple of minutes. "

More snow was melted in the tin can ; a pannikin of weak tea brought to Gardner ; and when the man had swallowed it, he asserted himself feeling much better.

" But where's th' rest of th' boys ? " he asked.

" You can search me. I've been wondering myself, and why they left here. They'd camped

here the night of the snowstorm ; but when I got up they'd hiked out—in a mighty hurry, too. And I'm not sure why."

"Then you hadn't cashed in," said Gardner, after lying awhile, his eyes closed. "I saw ye go down, 'n' I sure thought ye was a goner. But you wakes up, you says, finds me in th' snow—I was sure played out 'n' that sledge was blamed heavy ; I mind it buckin' me over—'n' brings me along here, hey ? "

"That's about the size of it."

"How long's that back ? "

"Yesterday morning when I found you. I'd have 'crossed over' sure, if it hadn't been for the grub on the sledge."

There was a long interval. Then——

"Why did ye do it ? " asked Gardner suddenly.

"Do what ? "

"Bring me along—fix me up so's I come alive again. Why ? You hadn't no call to."

The man was manifestly puzzled.

Harry laughed.

"Well, I suppose it was because that as you'd been the means of saving my life, and that one good turn deserves another, I thought I ought to do my best to try to pull you through."

"Then yer a blame fool," declared Gardner surprisingly.

Harry stared at him in frank amazement.

"A fool !" he repeated. "How's that ? "

"Why because, mister, if ye think I'm goin' t' fergit that I owes it to you I can't get through to that gold there's waitin' for me up in th'

Klondike—th' gold I'd set my heart on gettin' no matter what blame thing stood in the way ; if ye thinks I'm fergittin' that, waal, mister, yer mistaken."

" Oh well ;" and Harry laughed again. " No, I don't suppose, Gardner, you are going to forget it. Neither am I. All the same, thinking over it won't help us to get along any the better while we're together. And we'll be that for a while, you can bet. Best keep the thought at the back of your mind."

Gardner's eyes met his in a long, steady look. Then the man rolled his head over.

" Reckon I'll sleep a spell," he said.

" Right. Best thing you can do," Harry agreed. " The quicker you're good and well again the better for both of us."

That night Harry slept with one eye open and Gardner's Winchester with its cover off and ready for action at hand outside his blankets. An attack—if, indeed, such were contemplated—from the Indians was hardly likely to come at night, the red man having a prejudice against moving around in the darkness. But, as in the afternoon he had been caught napping, if any further mistake were to be made, he was going to see that it was on the side of over caution.

However, the night passed off undisturbed.

Gardner awakened and asserted himself fully recovered. He was, indeed, able to move about and lend a hand with the morning's preparations. Thanks to Harry's prompt and effective

measures—the man's bodily toughness and strength of constitution also—the effects of the freezing to which he had been subjected were but slight. He even declared himself willing and fit to take the trail forthwith, but to this Harry would not consent.

"We'll wait a while," he said. "No sense in rushing things. We're well fixed up here, and you've still some strength to make up. Don't want to see you fall to pieces again, most likely when we're in the middle of nowhere. We'll think about it to-morrow."

Maybe it is just as well for most of us that we are unable to forecast what "to-morrow" is going to bring. We are saved thereby a whole lot of trouble and disagreeable thinking. Could Harry have foreseen the events to develop within the next twenty-four hours, he would certainly have taken a risk, hit the trail again, and trusted to fortune against his companion's breakdown.

Time moved with leaden feet in the camp that day. Harry was of the energetic type, hating inaction and chafing against it; but, apart from bringing in more wood and the preparation of food, there was just nothing to be done.

Leave the camp he would not, though not because of any distrust of Jesse Gardner. He had no apprehension that the man would take advantage of his absence and try to get away. Only the veriest fool would abandon himself, weak of body and defenceless, to the merciless

cruelty of the wintry north-west ; and he had no belief that the American was a fool. Gardner knew well enough that, for the time being anyway, his safety was bound up with Harry's companionship.

On the other hand, Harry cherished no illusions with regard to the man's gratitude. Gardner had plainly told him he need not. He fully believed that if circumstances provided the opportunity for a reversal of their respective positions, Gardner would not have the slightest hesitation in taking advantage of the opportunity to its fullest extent.

For which reason Harry kept his prisoner's revolver on his own person and the Winchester under his observation.

It was knowledge of the Indians that prevented the lad from going out to seek the chance of fresh meat, to gain some information of the Red men the wood harboured. Should Indians appear at the camp during his absence, he foresaw trouble, knowing Gardner's attitude towards them. He had no wish to find a dead body and a plundered camp on his return—to find himself up against the hostility of a bunch of Indians as well as the rigours of the climate.

Even with a cheerful and congenial companion, a day under such conditions may easily be tedious and monotonous ; and Gardner was neither an enlivening nor a congenial comrade. The two had little or nothing in common, and conversation was difficult and scrappy. Some

part of the day Harry passed in making a better job of his repair of the damaged snowshoe. It was a satisfaction to Harry that Gardner was content to pass so much time asleep inside the tent.

He was so when Harry, satisfied meal-time had arrived, entered the tent to procure the necessaries. While he was getting the stuff together, Gardner awoke, looked, picked up the fry-pan and improvised tea-pots and went out. Five seconds later, when Harry followed, he saw the American standing by the fire, stock still, staring fixedly at a couple of large slabs of meat lying on the frozen snow twenty feet away from the tent.

There was no missing them—a conspicuous object against the dead white surface.

"Where you get them?" demanded Gardner, as the two pairs of eyes met after a brief interval.

Harry shook his head, and stepped across for closer examination.

He was willing to take oath the steaks had not been there when he entered the tent barely two minutes ago.

From where—whom—had they come?

It was like a conjuring trick.

Gardner joined him; and both bent for close inspection of the meat.

"Caribou," said Harry; and Gardner nodded.

They were large steaks, fresh meat, frozen stiff and hard as a couple of chunks of wood.

"Ain't done no shootin'," asserted rather than questioned the American. Harry shook his head.

"They weren't there when I came into the tent just now," he returned.

"That sure knocks me galley west," the American declared, staring vaguely around him, as though some suggestion towards an explanation of the mysterious happening were to be gathered from the landscape.

Suddenly his head came about, and through narrowed eyes he looked sharply at Harry.

"Sure ye didn't put 'em there?" he questioned.

"How on earth could I?" retorted Harry impatiently. "Where could I conjure caribou steaks from? I'm no magician."

"Licks cock fightin', sure," Gardner confessed.

He picked up the steaks, one in each hand, and applied his nose and, after, his tongue to first one and then the other.

Harry, to whom the origin of the meat was no puzzle, though its mysterious appearance was, who had been intently scanning the adjoining timber, saw him make a wry face. The next instant Gardner spat quickly and copiously.

"What is it?" asked the lad.

Gardner, his eyes flickering with a dangerous light, was regarding him significantly.

"Well?"

"Don't know where th' meat come from, hey? But I reckon ye ain't so blame ignorant of something else about it," Gardner said in a low, angry tone.

"What do you mean? Reckon I can make a guess as to whom it comes from, though I'm puzzled enough to understand——" began Harry.

" 'N' ye knows also who put th' pizen in it, hey ? " interrupted Gardner tensely.

" Poison ! " exclaimed Harry loudly, genuinely startled, as well he might have been by such a statement.

" Pizen I says, 'n' pizen I means," returned Gardner, with a return to the overbearing, bullying manner with which Harry had already made acquaintance. " Look at that."

Gardner pointed to where he had spat, a round, greenish-coloured stain on the white spotlessness of the snow.

" Good heavens ! " ejaculated Harry.

" One pizened, t'other aint," went on Gardner. " Now which of 'em, mister, d' yew reckon was meant for me, hey ? "

For a moment Harry eyed him doubtfully ; then——

" Come into the tent," he said ; and turned his back.

The flap closed behind Gardner's wide shoulders and the man stood still, the meat in his hands, looking at Harry expectantly.

" Gardner, just listen a while," began Harry. " And if there's anything you want to say, wait until I'm through. That meat was left by Indians. But how——."

" Indians ! "

" That's what I said. There's a camp of them in or near this wood. I know they are there. I have seen the tracks of two of them. Yesterday I saw one of them, watching me from the timber as I sat by the fire. Your

party saw them—knew they were about anyway. I think it was because of that discovery that your brother and the rest left camp here in such a mighty hurry, without waiting to try to find out what had become of you. Who or how many the Indians are I haven't a notion. You will remember what Charley had to say of the Red men around here. It was the Indians brought that meat—it couldn't have come from anyone else. The man who brought it must have been watching the camp, all the morning it is likely, awaiting the opportunity to leave it around; and he took the opportunity when I slipped inside and you waked up. Though I swear I had seen no one, and I wasn't asleep either—not since yesterday. But why the meat was brought at all; why one of the steaks should be poisoned, as you say it is, and the other not, is more than I can suggest. That's all I do know; and now you know as much as myself."

Gardner had listened with the utmost attention, his eyes on Harry's face the whole time. He glanced at the meat in his hands, rubbing one steak against the other. Then——

"You didn't say nothin' about these yer Indians before. Why?" he asked deliberately.

"Yesterday, Gardner, you were in no fit state to listen to anything," Harry answered. "To-day I refrained because I didn't think it was worth while. I was hoping that to-morrow you'd be fit enough for us to get away from here, so that whatever the intentions of the

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Indians might be—and they weren't to be guessed——."

"Don't seem altogether friendly now," interrupted Gardner grimly. "F'r one of us anyway." And he held up the poisoned steak. "Now for which of us d'ye reckon, mister, this was intended?"

"I don't know. Why should they want to kill only one?—Say, maybe they weren't knowing about you. You've been inside the tent."

"If that was so, reckon one steak 'd 've been enough," said Gardner.

And Harry had to admit the force of his reasoning. He added that, the Indians now having shown their hand, he intended resuming the journey north the next morning.

To this Gardner raised unexpected objection. He pointed out that escape from the treacherous swine was not to be gained thus. The Red men, having the assistance of dogs, would certainly overtake them easily, and shoot them down in the snow without the least trouble before there was any possible hope of re-joining Ed. Gardner and the others.

"But I don't meaning joining up with your crowd," Harry corrected him quietly. "We're going due north. You may as well know as much now, Gardner, as later."

"North! Not join up with th' others!" repeated Gardner. "An' why north, hey?"

"Until we hit the Mackenzie. Then we'll turn west to Fort Selkirk," Harry supplemented.

Gardner slipped an oath ; his face darkened with anger.

" So's you c'n join yer own people, 'n' hand me over to 'em for that little affair down at yer own show ? " he cried.

" That's my intention."

" You sure got a nerve," returned Gardner. " You may go north ; I ain't ; " and his jaw set stubbornly.

" You're going where I go."

" You don't take me along, mister, I promise."

" Don't I ? You watch me."

Gardner opened his mouth to speak, the blood rushing to his forehead, his eyes glaring. Then his teeth came together with a vicious snap, and he turned away.

Dinner was a silent meal. When it was finished, Gardner went abruptly into the tent and rolled himself in the blankets.

The caribou steaks had been thrown upon the snow.

A little later, as Harry sat by the fire, lacking no materials for hard thinking, an Indian stepped silently from the edge of the timber into the clearing. After him came two others. All were young men, Harry noticed, and they carried rifles. As soon as the leader saw himself observed, his right arm shot upwards, the palm turned towards Harry. It was the peace sign. The others did likewise.

Without rising, Harry beckoned to them to come forward, and, with soundless deliberation, the three braves solemnly advanced to within

ten paces of the fire and came to a standstill in a line.

"How," said Harry in customary greeting.

"How," returned the leader quietly.

"My brothers come in peace. Will they not sit down?" asked Harry politely.

The leading brave shook his head.

"Message to my white brother from big chief," he said.

"Then hold on a moment;" and, backing towards the tent, Harry pulled aside the flap. "The Indians are here. Guess you'd better come and take a hand, Gardner."

And out came the American, at whom the Red men glanced without the slightest expression of interest in their impassive faces.

"Well, who is your chief, and what is the message you bring?" asked Harry.

"Big chief Old Man sends this message to—."

Harry, head thrust suddenly forward, held up his hand, and the messenger stopped.

"What, say you, is the name of your chief?" Harry asked.

"Old Man. He send message that his white brothers shall go to meet him——."

"Th' deuce he does," interrupted Gardner angrily.

But Harry told him to "Shut up," though himself nettled by the form of the message, so derogatory to the dignity of a white man, the chief had chosen to employ.

"——white brothers shall go to meet him in the council lodge when the sun is there,"

and the messenger, unmoved by the interruption, indicated a point above the horizon.

"Is the white man a dog that when your chief says 'Come' he shall come?" asked Harry softly; but the messenger made no reply.

"You'll tell him t' hike out quick if he don't want his head broke, comin' to us with such a message," advised Gardner wrathfully.

But Harry did not tell him; instead he put a question against which even the Indian immobility of countenance was not proof.

"And where is Big Elk that Old Man should speak with the voice of an eagle, although he is but a jay tricked out in the eagle's feathers?" he demanded.

The messenger was visibly discomposed.

"The voice of Old Man is his own voice, the voice of a big chief," he replied, but haltingly.

"But is not Big Elk to Old Man as is the wolf of the timber to the yelping coyote?" pursued Harry.

"Old Man is great chief," answered the messenger sulkily. "I have given his message. What is my white brother's answer?"

"That if Old Man has anything of importance to say to us, let him come here and deliver his own message," replied Harry promptly.

The sombre eyes of the messenger flashed; he threw back his head.

"Big chief Old Man may come, and then my white brother may be sorry," he said proudly.

When the Indians had departed, Harry turned to his companion.

"Guess we'll be finding ourselves up against it," he said. "We know now who these Indians are. They're part of the tribe you went out of your way to raise trouble with at Fort Scott, and their leader is the chief who was most bitter against your outfit. What they're doing up here, so far from their usual stamping ground, I can't say; but here they are. They know you're on hand, and, if their chief's talk before meant anything at all, they'll be in no hurry to leave until they've had a fair try to get what they want."

"And that is?"

"Your life, my friend."

Gardner regarded him with a grim smile.

"Save *yew* a mighty lot o' trouble, mister," he rejoined cynically. "Reckon I c'n tell now why *one* of them steaks was pizened."

And he turned back into the tent.

The discovery that the Indians whose presence in the wood he had regarded as a menace to his own and Gardner's safety were actually the tribe—or part of the tribe—that he had come to consider as "his own" Indians procured Harry anything but satisfaction. In the circumstances in which he found himself, it would have been sheer self-delusion to believe that he could exert over them the smallest influence, if the conclusion to which he had come was correct, as seemed only too probable.

The mere presence of the Indians in the Trout Lake region, so far from their usual hunting grounds, pointed to a break-up of the tribe

—probably as a means of escaping the dreaded Police. The sending of the message in the name of Old Man, the messenger's ignoring of Harry's reference to the head chief, Big Elk, strongly corroborated Harry's deduction.

Harry had not forgotten Old Man, that belligerent chieftain whose voice had been raised so strongly in approbation of the action of The Rabbit and his fellows; who had spoken so vehemently in opposition to Harry's attempt at an amicable settlement of the outrage committed by the Gardner outfit upon the pack train.

Old Man was ambitious, a surly, ill-conditioned fellow at the best of times, and chafing under the authority of Big Elk. He owned all the bloodthirsty vindictiveness against his enemies of the Red man of the previous century. With what triumph and exultation must he have learned that the man almost wholly responsible for the insults and injuries the tribe had been forced to bear, who had planned the outrages against the tribe's pride and its possessions, who had spilled the blood of its warriors, was delivered helpless into his hands.

The slaying of Gardner Old Man would regard as a just retribution, a sacred duty. With the man at his mercy, he was as likely to forgo the slaking of his blood thirst as a coyote to abstain from falling upon the abandoned and helpless caribou calf.

That there would be greater compunction in regard to his own life, Harry could easily understand, though he did not flatter himself as

possessing the chief's good will ; but that compunction would vanish if Harry persisted in standing between the chief and his sacred duty of vengeance.

Harry, quite as well as Jesse Gardner, now realised the offering of the caribou steaks and why only one of them had been rubbed with poison. Old Man desired the life of but a single enemy. Maybe he had some vague notion that the Great Spirit would take care that the doctored offering was accepted where intended.

Harry Revell's life Old Man would take only if he were driven to it ; but Jesse Gardner he intended killing whatever befell.

Harry Revell, as resolute of spirit as the Indian chief, was equally determined that Jesse Gardner's life should not be taken.

" So Old Man reckons I'm going to be feeling mighty sorry before long," the lad told himself. " Well, maybe. But there'll be others ; " and he turned into the tent.

Gardner stood up as Harry entered, a bitter, ugly look in his harsh face.

" Th' pizen not havin' worked, yer goin' to hand me over t' yer red acquaintances, hey ? " he drawled.

" Sure ; that's why I didn't let you go on freezing to death," scoffed Harry. " Guess that's what such a man as you, Jesse Gardner, would think. Now then," and his voice changed, the words coming out sharp and crisply, " you and I are in this together, and we're going to halve the work. I'm not doubting that you're

the man to fight ; but if you shoot unless there's absolute necessity, I promise you as surely as we're standing here, I'll charge you with Wilful Murder myself, in addition to the rest, when I get you up to Fort Selkirk."

While speaking, Harry had been unbuckling Gardner's holster from his own belt. He held it out to the man, whose hands hesitated a second or two before taking the weapon.

" Y' ain't thinkin' I'll mebbe shoot you by mistake," he sneered, attaching the holster to his own hip.

" I'm just giving you credit for not being such a confounded fool," returned Harry coldly.

CHAPTER XXI

THE STRONGER WILL

They had not long to wait, even as Harry had expected. Within twenty minutes of the withdrawal of the messenger, an Indian glided from among the spruce stems and came to a standstill at the edge of the clearing upon Harry's command to halt.

"Is it peace?" shouted Harry in the Cree tongue; and the brave extended his right arm above his head, palm outwards.

"Is the chief, Old Man, come to talk with his white brothers?" was next asked.

Either the big chief had put his pride in his pocket or had concluded that his revenge might be as well taken in one part of the wood as another, for the Indian replied that Old Man was there and willing to talk.

"Tell him, then, that I am waiting and ready to talk with him," returned Harry.

So from out of the gloom of the trees came Old Man, and attended by six braves, amongst whom Harry recognised The Rabbit, Many Tails and two others who had been with the riders checked in their headlong charge upon the rifle pits, stalked with gloomy dignity across the clearing towards the fire near which Harry had seated himself upon a case of tinned meats.

Upon the edge of the timber gathered, half

concealed, a half score more Red men, whom Gardner, a little to Harry's right, was eyeing with grim attention.

To another meat case facing him Harry drew the chief's notice, and silently invited him to be seated.

Old Man ignored the politeness. He was a short Indian, but much more sturdily and strongly built than is usual with his race, and very dark of skin. The eyes were deeply set and close together; the cheek bones ultra-high and prominent. A blow with some heavy weapon or a severe accident had destroyed the shape of the prominent, typically Indian hawk nose, giving an entirely unprepossessing appearance to his face, which was accentuated by the ill-tempered, morose expression of the black eyes.

"My brother bids me come to a peace talk, but behold, my brother is garbed for war," he said in a harsh voice, pointing to the Winchester lying across Harry's seat.

"It is the custom, as the chief should know, for men on a long journey to go prepared," rejoined Harry tranquilly. "Besides, if there be peace in the heart, what matters it if weapons be at hand? What is the message which the chief has brought me?"

"It is this, my brother; for I am one who speaks with a tongue that goes straight, without twisting and turning," answered the Indian, for whom, apparently, Jesse Gardner did not exist, although Old Man's stretched out fingers

might easily have touched the American's sleeve. "A great wrong has been done to our tribe; our goods have been plundered, our young men cruelly shamed; the blood of our warriors has been spilled, and against all these our tribe has received no atonement. We have been driven into exile; we fear to sleep. Our bellies grow flat because there is no food in the land into which we have been driven; our hearts tremble with the fear that each day will show to us those who would lead us into captivity. And those who have brought this cruelty and suffering upon us go unpunished for their evil doing. It is not right. The law of the Great Spirit, the law of the Company, is the law of Justice. But for the poor Red man there is no justice. Is it just that those who have wronged the Red men should go unpunished? Is it right that the injurer should go free while the injured suffer? The white man says No. And this, then, is the message that I bring to you, my white brother: Give to me the white man who stays with thee, who dwells in thy tent; give him to me that he may be punished according to his evil doing."

A dark, strong flame suddenly lighted up the sombre eyes as they were flashed upon Gardner for the first time; and with pointing arm, the fingers quivering with passion, in a loud voice that trembled with the man's intensity of feeling, the chief cried——

"Give to me, my brother, this man that stands beside thee, for he is the chief over those

who have done so evilly to my tribe, that we may punish him as he deserves; for it is the Great Spirit that has delivered him into our hands."

His voice ceased abruptly on a high note, and from those who stood behind him like copper images came a grunt of approval.

Well indeed the man had spoken, and Harry had no wonder that his influence upon the younger men of the tribe was greater than that of Big Elk, who lacked the gift of fiery eloquence, and whose tongue was ever turned towards the words of peace.

"I have heard the words of the chief," replied Harry; "and my heart is with him. Your tribe has suffered shame and injury; but Old Man is wrong when he says that the evil doers go unpunished. Already the police are searching for them. They will be caught, and they will be punished. The chief has said that it is the Great Spirit has delivered the leader of the ill doers into his hands. The chief is wrong. It is into my hands the man has been delivered; and because here he stands unbound and alive is no proof that he will escape punishment. Assuredly not. Into my hands has he been given, and even now I am on my way to take him where his crime will be punished. Be content, chief. The law of the white man, the law of the Company, is the law of justice. Does not every Indian know there are not two laws—one for the White man and one for the Red? Be content, then, I say."

"My brother will give me this man?" returned Old Man, as soon as the final word left Harry's lips.

For all the effect he had produced the lad might just as usefully have remained silent.

"I have said what I will do. I do not speak with two tongues," rejoined Harry coldly.

"My brother will give me this man," repeated Old Man in a level voice.

"I have spoken, not saying one thing and meaning another."

"My brother knows the meaning of his words?" queried the chief; and there was something in the harsh voice, which, low as the words were spoken, told of passion hardly controlled, and more menacing in its hidden meaning than the former strident arrogance.

Harry looked into the dark face scornfully.

"Does the chief think me a child, one who speaks not knowing the sound of his own words?"

"And my brother will not change his mind?"

"No."

"Not when he remembers that Old Man has twenty warriors eager to obey his command, while my white brother is but one?"

"Not to-morrow, nor a hundred to-morrows," said Harry firmly.

And then Harry suddenly leaned quickly to the side and grabbed Gardner by the arm.

"For your own sake, you fool, stand still and do nothing," he commanded in a fierce whisper.

Gardner had moved slightly, hiding his right arm ; but Harry, whose sole attention had not been given to the chief, had noted the elbow movement telling of a motion towards the revolver butt.

Came a growl from the American. " But th' blame swines mean killin'. Y' c'n see it in their faces."

" Show an inch of that gun, and both of us 'll be filled with lead. Haven't you grit enough to stand up and look as though you didn't care a row of pins what they'd *like* to do ? "

" Stand up 'n' be shot down before I could plug one of th' swine ? " Gardner got back.

" Yes ; if you show them you're so afraid you'll fight. Let 'em see that you *know* they daren't shoot, unless you want both of us killed. They'll talk, but they won't find the nerve to act unless you encourage them."

Talk ! They did talk. Old Man led the performance, beginning a wild and impassioned harangue while Harry and Gardner had been indulging in their confab together. The chief's eyes flashed, his voice rang out in husky sonorousness, he waved his arms without discretion. Inspired by so good an example, the rest of the band lent assistance. Gone was the traditional stoical calm of the Indian ; vanished the fiction that the Red man is a man of few words and these to the point. They talked—oh ! they talked all right. The clamour of voices grew deafening. All talked ; all were too vocal to find time to listen.

The narrow-faced Rabbit accompanied his chief with a dramatic recital of the surprise attack on the pony grub train; he indicated the wound he had received. His volubility and wealth of gesture were superb.

Many Tails, recollecting the tragedy of his shot mongrel, a poor beast whose vocation in life had been to serve as something to be severely kicked every time its master required gentle exercise, told of the brutal slaughter, and mentioned the awful things he was going to do to the wretch whom the Great Spirit had delivered into their power.

Catching the excitement, the warriors who had been content to remain in the background at the edge of the timber now advanced boldly into the clearing and added their voices, the stamping of their moccasined feet, and the banging of their weapons to the diabolical hubbub.

It was Pandemonium; and amid all the uproar, cross-legged on his tinned meat case, whittling away with his knife at a little stick, sat Harry Revell, his attention considerably less given to the noisy, gesticulating, threatening Red men than to his white companion.

He was quite convinced that Jesse Gardner was the better worth watching. And watch Harry did, with the eyes of a lynx.

Once or twice he reached out and twitched the American by the sleeve, with a "Steady, man!" which possibly was smothered by the raucous clamouring. But the touch upon his arm the man understood.

Again let it be said Jesse Gardner was no coward. He had courage in plenty, but it was the purely physical bravery which finds its expression in the giving and taking of blows. It is the courage which animates the fighting animal.

He did not fear death; the animated threatening of the Indians inspired no terror in him. He would have met the whole bunch single-handed. He would have stood his ground obstinately, fired the six shots of his revolver, and then gone down, fighting to the bitter end, under the clubbed rifles, the hatchets, the feet of his assailants.

Alone in that clearing, he would have been lying dead within half a minute of the beginning of Old Man's opening speech.

In good time the hubbub abated; it was possible to hear a single voice; and Harry got up from his seat, without haste. Shoving knife and hands into his pockets, he stepped close to chief Old Man.

"You have talked—a whole lot. Now it is my turn," he said calmly. "You don't seem to have understood what I said before. I will say it again. I speak for the last time. You want this man. I tell you that he belongs to me—to the law of the white man. Therefore you shall not take him. That is all."

And Harry stepped back to his case and deliberately sat down.

The silence that attended his short speech was shattered by an outbreak ten times more

loud and vehement than before. Hysteria seemed to fall upon the Red men. They yelled and stamped. They howled the most astonishing menaces. There came a combined rush towards the fire ; but, with a sudden movement, Harry threw himself upon Gardner, gripped his hand, and twisted away the whipped-out revolver before it could be used. The weapon he pitched contemptuously on the ground.

On three sides the whites were surrounded by the mob of infuriated Red men, in whom all the primitive savagery of the Indian blood was now rampant. Clenched fists were shaken, rifles and hatchets madly brandished. A tall warrior picked up Gardner's revolver and held the muzzle almost touching Harry's breast. Old Man himself snatched at the Winchester and waved it aloft in triumph. The owner offered not the faintest protest or remonstrance.

" Well," he said, his eyes fixing the distorted face of the warrior threatening him. " Well, why don't you fire ? I cannot prevent you."

The uproar ceased abruptly as though a tap had been turned off. The Indians suddenly froze into copper statues of immobility. Dark skinned hands holding raised weapons stiffened. The eyes of the entire savage crew, gleaming with the blood lust, were fixed intently upon the face, composed though bloodless beneath its tanning of sun and wind, of the youthful white trader.

It was the crucial moment.

" Well, why don't you shoot ?" repeated Harry.

And even as he spoke, the lad's body thrilled as the wonder shot into his brain whether he would feel anything if the brave accepted his invitation.

Eye to eye they stood, the Red and the White, fair representatives of the two races ; and behind those windows of the human soul there was being fought out a contest for mastery as keen, as vigorous as any ever decided by physical combat. It was a conflict of mind, of intelligence and power of will.

And this time it was the mind of the white race that won the victory—as it will, ninety-nine times in every hundred.

The eyelids of the brave began to quiver. He could hold that intense, steady regard no longer. His gaze fell ; and the barrel of the six-shooter sagged and lowered.

The Red man admitted himself the loser.

Then Harry's voice broke the silence, clear, unraised, but reaching the brain of every one of the intent listeners.

" You don't dare to shoot—because you are afraid. You are a coward—afraid to kill one who has no weapon in his hand. Give me that pistol."

And under the eyes of his own people, who had been watching and waiting, ready to act swiftly upon the prompting they should receive from him, Wolf-That-Howls, cowed and submissive, surrendered his weapon and slunk back, passing behind the bodies of his awed comrades.

"Chief." Harry advanced towards Old Man and took from him the rifle without meeting resistance. "Take your people away and trouble me no further."

Before one could count twenty slowly there wasn't an Indian left within sight. Silently, submissively, the vengeance-seeking bunch slipped between the trees and disappeared.

"Thank Heaven!" murmured Harry piously.

"Touch 'n' go, hey?" observed Gardner. "I sure reckoned both you 'n' me was due t' cross th' Divide."

But the attempted note of jocularly fell flat; the man's voice gave him away. The grin about his lips was a mere contortion; and he was shaking like a victim of the ague.

"If you'd had your way, we'd both be dead by now," Harry told him.

"It's th' fact, mister, I believe you," admitted the other. "Say, where'd ye learn yer spellbinding trick, hey?"

To this Harry made no answer, but observed that the fire had burned low, and that he would do well to go and rustle more wood.

Presently the sound of axes rang through the timber. Harry had selected a big dead birch, feeling the need of strenuous physical labour as a relief from the mental strain and tension of the past few minutes. But he found himself curiously weak. He had a queer feeling inside—could not get the correct body-swing; and he hacked away like a tenderfoot.

The encounter with the Red men had taken

from him more than he had supposed. He was tired, his limbs languid.

That evening, supper concluded, he turned abruptly upon his companion with the remark—"You haven't any doubts that you're going along with me to Fort Selkirk?" he asked. And without giving Gardner the time to reply, he continued: "Because if you have, you'd better get rid of them right away. We're getting away from here as soon as we've packed up."

Gardner stared at him in blank surprise.

"Gettin' away to-night!" he exclaimed.

"That's exactly what I said," replied Harry sharply. "Do you want reasons? I should say this afternoon had given you enough and to spare. Those Indians have been put off just for the time. How long d' you suppose they'll stay quiet? Until the morning. After that they'll be looking for a chance to put a couple of bullets into us when we aren't watching; and the chances are too many around here to suit me. The quicker and farther we get away from this place, the better the hope of reaching Fort Selkirk. And that's where we're going. Get a move on packing. There'll be moon enough for guide."

And without even waiting to see whether Gardner had concluded to obey, Harry flung more dead wood on the fire to make a big blaze to assist in the packing.

Gardner did obey, though conscious of a feeling of wonder at himself being thus success-

fully ordered about by "a kid." Also, he had an opinion of his own as to the reaching of Selkirk. There was plenty might happen—he was going to see did happen—before the two of them reached that stronghold of the H. B. C. "The kid" might have made up his mind otherwise, but he, Gardner, hadn't forgotten that he held an important say in the matter.

Indeed, there was some wisdom in making a get-away now. Those red skunks had been properly bull-dozed in the afternoon. They'd been put in their place, but whether they'd stay put was another matter. Maybe it was better not to give them the chance of getting in a treacherous bullet. They were crafty, uncertain dogs anyway.

But out on the trail, just their two selves, well, it was another matter altogether. There were chances; there would be no one to interfere. Well, it would be seen what would happen. He'd been forced to eat dirt enough already, and the taste wasn't pleasant. There'd be a change-over likely before long, you bet. There were men a-plenty who'd tried to put it over him, Jesse Gardner, but they'd found the proposition too tough a one. Was he going to take water now from a kid? Sure not. That kid had baulked him too much already—had kept him out of the Klondike and from realising his dream of plentiful and easy-won gold. Was he going to forget that? No, by thunder, he wasn't. Harry Revell wasn't going to be allowed to forget it neither.

With his mind thus running, Gardner worked briskly and well, fully seconding Harry's active exertions towards a quick break-up of the camp.

Less than half an hour after Harry's statement of his intention, the sledge was loaded with their belongings, and the two were ready to start.

"No, leave the fire," Harry commanded. "It'll help our red friends to believe we're still here, should it happen they're bent on keeping an eye on us."

So the two got on the move, Harry leading, Gardner hauling on the sledge rope. They went slowly, to make as little noise as possible until the outskirts of timber fringing the wood was passed, though neither thought it likely any watch would be kept upon the clearing. But in the great silence of the northern plains sounds travel far. Especially is this so in winter, when the still, crisp, frost-laden atmosphere appears to acquire the ability to magnify and transmit the faintest vibrations; when the movement of the sledge runners over the crisped surface has an accompaniment that falls upon the ear like the sharp clinking of shattering icicles; and a call in a loud voice rings like a blow upon steel.

Once out upon the vast plain, an unbroken expanse of purest white that glittered in the cold, clear silver of the moonlight like polished steel, greater haste was possible.

Low as was the temperature, the frost keener

than it had been for the past two days, the surface of the snow had not yet hardened into a crust sufficiently firm to make the operation of breaking trail superfluous. At this Harry was taking the first spell.

Fists clenched, head down, he pounded down the snow with the great unwieldy snow-shoes. Down went his foot into a hollow fully a foot in depth and twice as wide. Then came the pulling up and out—the movement which after a while makes the thigh muscles ache as nothing else on earth can ; which brings red-hot pains into the knee joints ; and causes those terrible knottings and twisting of the calf muscles that in combination are known as *mal de raquette*. The four white walls enclosing the shoe are loth to leave go. The snow comes up through the netting and fixes itself about the ankles, insidiously reaching for the tops of the moccasins.

There is a strength required to lift the raquette out of that hollow ; the trail-breaker's breath comes in gasps, forming about the face and behind like a tiny cloud or trail of smoke. The fierce exertion brings free perspiration upon the cheeks, moistening the furry lining of the traveller's hood, and bringing with it the risk of frost-bitten cheeks and jaws.

There is no other means of progression, but one does not move forward rapidly.

It was the daily prospect to which Harry and his companion had to look forward, until the winter had got thoroughly into its stride, and the cold developed an intensity sufficient

to transform the snow surface into a firm and unyielding crust.

So, taking turn about to go ahead, they won through the night ; until the stars paled and the moon faded in the increasing light of the coming dawn. Then they rested, scooping with their snow-shoes a hole in the snow, and huddling together for the sake of warmth. Food they did not touch ; physical exhaustion had conquered even appetite. Even for firing they were too utterly fatigued to attempt search. Body and brain numb with sheer, all-embracing weariness, they desired but to rest ; to forget in the unconsciousness of sleep the unremitting complaining of the cruelly-used muscles.

CHAPTER XXII

UNEXPECTED DELIVERANCE

The sky was still light when Harry Revell, turning in his sleep, unclosed his sleep-clogged eyes. He rolled over partly, and, although the sense of feeling was still too heavily drugged for realisation of the fact that he was numb with cold, the physical movement, slight as it was, caused so sharp an agony of pain to shoot through the stiffened muscles that a groan escaped him.

It was sufficient. His already-closing lids opened again ; a stab of recollection aroused his dulled brain sufficiently to direct the physical effort ; and, forcing himself to hands and knees, he crept out of the icy burrow.

Outside, he found a difficulty in standing upright. Every joint was rusted and stiff ; every muscle seemed incapable of performing its functions, and protested excruciatingly against coercion.

As soon as he was outside, the bitter cold got to work. A wind was blowing, its touch like needle-pointed knives of ice ; and, in spite of the pain each movement occasioned as the reluctant blood was forced into circulation, Harry began to stamp violently and beat his swinging arms upon his chest.

It was exquisite torture, sharp needles shooting under the finger nails while a flood of hot liquid

metal seemed to be pouring over the backs of his hands. A hot pricking filled his feet and legs; whereat Harry was glad, although he could have yelled with the pain—evidence that the frostbite had not seized him. For with frostbite comes cessation of all feeling in the part attacked.

In a few minutes the cold was beaten from the extremities, but no degree of exercise was capable of removing the feeling of weakness and cold at his vitals which every indrawn breath seemed but to accentuate.

He had gone to sleep without food inside him to repair the waste occasioned by the tremendous exertions of the hours before; the body was deprived of its internal heat; and nowhere else as in the northland is the fact so well impressed upon man that food is the source of both heat and strength.

He glanced at the sky, where the sun told him he had already slept too long. Pursuit by the Indians he looked upon as a foregone conclusion. Not for all time and from any distance will the magic of the white man's dominating influence of will control that of the uncivilised aboriginal. Old Man's thirst for revenge assuredly would send the warriors hurrying along the trail of the fugitives.

To delay meant——. Recollecting some of the stories he had heard of old McCraw's telling, Harry did not care to think. In the out-of-the-way places of the North West, the Red man still occasionally will revert to ancient practices

which the newspaper reader would not care to happen upon in a full recital of the truth.

But then such things don't get into the newspapers. They are referred to sometimes over camp fires, and the men who listen believe.

With fist and foot Harry succeeded in awakening Gardner, and the latter, when the necessity of an immediate start was told him, flatly refused to budge.

"I'm played out," he urged. "'N' no wonder, with th' way you drove us last night. There's wood to be found yonder; we've grub. Get a fire started, get some grub into us, 'n' I'm willing t' move right along."

"There isn't time. We're not far enough ahead. D' you reckon on the Indians letting us slip off for good?"

"I don't. I know th' red swine, I guess, better 'n you do," returned Gardner. "They won't let up on us until they has to. All th' same, I just need that grub 'n' I'm goin' t' have it."

His thin lips met in an obstinate line, and defiance looked out from his hollow eyes.

"Th' cold's gotten me here," the American went on, pressing a hand on his stomach. "We ain't eaten for twenty-four hours, 'n' I'm famished. 'Nless I get warmed up good with a fire 'n' grub, I couldn't last a quarter-mile. 'N' I don't mean tryin'."

"Not even though it means the Indians getting hold of us—the difference between life and death?" asked Harry.

He admitted there was wisdom in Gardner's words. The man did look played-out. A fire and a warm meal would restore to both a deal of energy and strength—would enable them to go on, to fight if the need came. Yet there are times when it is necessary to go on in spite of the needs and the weakness of the body; when a man travels on his will instead of his stomach, and wins through. The records of Arctic exploration, of the pioneers across the Australian continent, hold the truth of such assertion.

Was it worth while attempting to force Gardner to go on? There are times when force is necessary, is productive of first-class results. There are others when the employment of force merely demonstrates the vanity of a man rather than his resolution and strength of will. He is a wise man who realises which of these is the mainspring of his purpose.

"If it's a matter o' dyin'," Gardner was saying, "I'd as soon—sooner—die warm 'n' strong than by inches. Yer gun's handy, mister. Get it out, if ye means goin' on, an' try me. But I stays anyway. Ye c'n tote my body along to Fort Selkirk if ye like. Try it; I ain't making no kick."

You drive or lead, according to the man; but there is a stage of wretchedness and despair when you can neither lead nor drive. Gardner had reached it. His refusal was not the blind perversity of the mule. The man could simply do no more.

"That'll do then," Harry returned. "We'll risk it together."

And he wasn't denying to himself that his own mouth was beginning to water at the suggestion of the taste of food again. He was as hungry as Gardner, as cold; but he could have continued along the trail because there was in him a definite purpose which the other lacked. But to lose Gardner would be to lose his purpose. So he gave way.

"Find the stuff, and I'll go rustle some firing," he told Gardner.

And he began to pound through the snow to where the fantastically warped branches of a solitary pine-tree pointed to the southward. Thought of the glorious warmth soon to be felt lent a spurious strength, and the keen blade of his axe rang on the wood of the tree with a sound easily to be heard a mile distant. It was a dead tree, for which Harry gave thanks.

Stumbling under his burden of branches, Harry was coming back. A weak shout from Gardner came to his ears, and he saw that the man was hopping about in anticipation of the joy to be. Then his eyes shifted mechanically back along their trail of the night before; and he thought he could see a black dot set upon the dazzling whiteness of the plain as it sloped down from the flanks of a range of low hills they had crossed during the night.

Steeling himself against the suspicion, Harry reached the snow house and flung down his burden, beginning work at once with his axe.

"Hurry, man," he adjured Gardner, who at once began to lend a hand. "We'll be frozen stiff."

Numbed fingers made the matches hard to deal with, but within two minutes the dry pine splinters were flaring strongly. Larger ones were added, and a bright blaze began to glow. Gardner laughed almost hysterically.

"Keep her at it," encouraged Harry.

He moved away, but Gardner wasted no attention upon him. He wasn't even curious why a man should voluntarily withdraw himself from the life-giving fire. Sufficient for himself was the enjoyment of its warmth.

So he did not even suspect that Harry was watching the black dot he had seen on the hill slope gradually grow larger, resolve itself into a series of small dark dashes, and, finally, before Harry went back to the now blazing fire against which Gardner was thawing out tins of meat, into objects which were recognisable as Indians beyond all doubting.

"Grub ready?" he asked casually.

"Pile into her," Gardner returned, mouth already full.

He was rushing the making of a gillette in a fry-pan, in which the lard was already sizzling. Half mixed, the compound went into it, was watched with wolfish eyes for a few seconds, fished out merely warmed, torn into two parts, and hastily swallowed.

Harry fed himself a few mouthfuls, watching curiously his companion—not an agreeable sight;

for the man was like a famished wolf come suddenly upon unexpected meat. His whole being was absorbed in the act of swallowing, the engulfing of food which he could not have tasted.

In sheer disgust Harry turned away. Of what use to tell this creature that they were pursued, the Indians less than a mile away? Until his gross hunger was satisfied, he was blind, deaf, dumb.

Stripping the cover from his Winchester, Harry deliberately stretched himself within a shallow trench stamped in the snow beside the trail. That he was seen by the keen-eyed Indians he did not doubt; but they came steadily onwards, six braves on snow-shoes in single file, then another driving a dog-drawn sledge, while an eighth walked behind.

At a distance of half a mile, the party halted; there followed two or three minutes' consultation, then the advance was continued for a further hundred yards. Again a halt; three rifles were thrown up, and the explosions, like a crack from a mammoth whip, shattered the silence of the waste. Followed three more shots in irregular succession. But there came no return fire. Harry meant wasting no lead by firing at long range.

A few further yards, again a halt; and then the Indians crouched, as though suddenly realising the mark they presented.

It was at this moment that Gardner, disturbed at last in his feeding, came stumbling into view

from behind the great drift within the shelter of which the fugitives had passed the night.

"Revell! Revell!" he yelled.

From the Red men came an answering yell, and one, rising to his knees, brought his rifle to the shoulder and fired. Even with the expert marksman, firing across snow may be uncertain; the dead whiteness of the expanse seems to have the effect of deceiving the eye and misleading the judgment, and the Indian's bullet struck the surface fifty feet short of its plain mark. But Gardner cried out; and Harry, believing him hit and anxious to correct their assailants' likely inference of easy-won success, pressed on his own trigger.

The next instant the Indian was flat on his back, bruised fingers in his mouth and blood pouring from a gash in his cheek, while his useless rifle, smashed at the grip by Harry's bullet, was lying on the snow.

Down beside Harry flopped Gardner, panting and scared.

"Why didn't ye tell me they was comin'?" he demanded.

"Because I didn't think you could do any good and that you'd like to finish your meal first," returned Harry. "Were you hit?"

"No."

Both watched the Indians. One crawled back to the dog team, which he turned and took back along the trail out of danger; the rest, separating to right and left of the trail, began to crawl across the snow with the evident

intention of enclosing the white men in a semi-circle.

"Look at 'em," burst out Gardner violently. "Eight of 'em. There's 'bout as much chance for you 'n me as snowball in a stove."

"Better than that, I hope. They won't do much harm at this distance; and I guess I can make them believe it isn't healthy to try to get any closer. You go back and finish eating, Gardner. You think a whole lot of a good square meal."

A dark flush spread across Gardner's face as he glanced at his companion.

"Guess there ain't no need t' rub it in," he said sulkily. "I know that this stopping to eat has let the red swine catch up on us. But honest to John, mister, if I hadn't gotten something inter me belly just now, I sure wouldn't have lasted another five minutes."

"Maybe; and neither shall I. Take my place while I go and get something to eat."

In that biting, numbing temperature, inaction was a misery. Brief as the period Harry had been lying in the trench, his very blood seemed to have congealed, all life frozen from his extremities. He walked to the fire without knowing that his feet belonged to him.

Ten minutes later, thawed, the bolted meal of hot food diffusing warmth through his body, he felt a new man. Relieving Gardner, he sent the latter back to the fire.

It was cruel, killing work, against which the tormented body cried out in agonised protest,

but Harry's will was obdurate. A few minutes in the trench, and the deadly cold began to take effect, the blood to freeze in the veins. After his second spell, Gardner, who had made a vain attempt to induce Harry into continuing their journey, taking the chance of being shot as they struggled along, refused to take his turn. He would rather give himself up to the Red men; he would prefer to shoot himself rather than endure this killing by inches.

"There's no hope," he said sullenly. "Those red skunks ain't feelin' it as we are; they're movin' about. They'll last longer 'n we can; 'n' then th' end 'll be th' same as if we threw in our hands now. We bucked ag'in th' game long enough. I'm through."

"Very well," replied Harry. "You get to the fire and stay there. I'm not giving in yet. I tell you again, you and I are due to make Fort Selkirk together."

So he continued the defence alone. When lying still became no longer bearable, he would get up, stamping and beating to keep back the destroying cold, although thus inviting the Indians' attention.

Shooting on both sides was frequent; and although the Red men's bullets went wildly astray, Harry again and again got near enough to his mark to deter his enemies from venturing to lessen the distance between them.

Never perhaps has the pale Northern sun, witness of many a dire and pitiful tragedy, looked down upon a stranger picture than this

bitter duel fought out on the glittering snow waste between the Indians' obstinate intention not to forgo the consummation of their vengeance-lust and a white man's stubborn determination and inability to realise when he was beaten. Yet what but one result was to be looked for?

The sun was already hanging half-way between its zenith and the already clouding horizon when Harry observed the Indian left in charge of the sledge desert his charge and make hurriedly towards his strung-out fellows. He heard clearly the long call to attract the attention of the warriors. He saw the man halt, waving his arms, and pointing in the direction of the low hills. A few seconds, and the lad's heart was throbbing with relief.

The Red men were hastening back. For a reason which he was unable to guess, they had relinquished the contest.

Awhile he waited, fearing that he had been deceived; but when he saw the braves start along the backward trail, he rose stiffly and made his way to where Gardner was huddling beside the diminishing fire.

"Get a move on," he commanded. "We're going forward. The Indians have chucked up the sponge."

But Gardner made no move until Harry shook him roughly by the shoulder.

"Get up, man. We've stayed here long enough. It's us to hit the trail again. The Indians have quit—cleared out."

And then the American looked at him, his eyes expressionless, his whole body limp.

"They're foolin' ye," he answered drearily. "They'll come back again. And what's it matter if they do? Let 'em come. They'll find me here. I'm not movin'. I've finished."

His manner was that of a man so wholly broken as no longer to care what might befall. His chin dropped back into his hands; his dull eyes drooped to the fire, dying for want of fuel, the pile Harry had cut and fetched being exhausted.

Harry regarded the man with downright anger.

"You're talking like a fool," he cried. "Finished, have you? Reckon I've a word to say about that. What more in thunder d' you want? You've a full belly; the Indians have gone; the way's clear ahead. Get up."

Gardner raised his head, slowly screwed about, and stared across the white, limitless plain with the face of a frightened child.

"Up there!" he murmured. A strong shudder shook him from head to foot. "I can't," he moaned.

"You shall!"

With threat, objurgation, and insult he belaboured the listless man. He flung the word coward in the man's face; and Gardner did not even change colour. Jeers and execrations slipped from him as a pack slips down a frozen hill-slope. Harry even struck at him, and he refused to budge.

"Well," said Harry finally, as though giving up the struggle; "if you won't go, you'll stay; but you stay alone. I thought you'd grit, Jesse Gardner, whatever else might be wrong with you. I know now I was wrong. No wonder the rest of your outfit left you behind. One coward in a crowd is one too many. And you'd called yourself a leader! Why I'd back even Simmins or Martin for grit and staying power against you. I see now why you took water from the Indians. You were scared all to pieces of them. And they knew it. You weren't worth the trouble of saving from Old Man and his push. And you reckoned you could get to the Klondike and win gold. You dreamt it. It takes a man to do that, and you haven't the spunk of the measliest tenderfoot. A yellow streak! Man, you're yellow, all yellow, through and through. And he thought he was good enough to get into the Yukon! Ha, ha!"

Before the echo of the laugh had died away, Gardner was on his feet, fists clenched, face distorted. At Harry he sent a look of concentrated passion and hate.

"Jesse Gardner a coward," he whispered hoarsely. "A coward! By th' Livin' Water, mister, but I'll show ye! 'N' you laid hands on me! All right, all right!"

With furious energy he fell to loading up the sledge.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE END OF THE TRAIL

The weeks that followed left their mark upon Harry Revell, a mark never to be effaced, though at the time he was unaware of any alteration within himself.

It had begun the day he rode out from Fort Scott to seek the police. Though he had played a man's part during the weeks before, his had been the boy's heart. By no means irresponsible, his outlook had been coloured with the irresponsibility, the vague, though warm imagination that belongs to boyhood.

Even when he stood face to face with Old Man, and by sheer force of character and will brought the savage fury of the chief under the dominance of his own purpose, there was yet remaining something of the boyish spirit that finds something splendid in high-sounding phrases, in the obvious display of fine physical courage.

But during the weeks of wandering in the snowy wilderness that came after, the last of the boy was eliminated, and Harry Revell stood forth grown man, and the man on whom the exacting North had set its sign of approval.

The impatience, the haste "to do," of boyhood became the deliberation of the man. Assurance, which may be grounded only on belief, strengthened into confidence, which is

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the outcome of experience and knowledge. Ignorance of the burden readily assumed which is beneath the boy's self-reliance, was changed to the man's understanding of the actual weight to be borne.

The change was to be read in the slower tongue, the greater patience, the lessened tendency to betray disappointment and to permit his face to be the clear index of his thoughts. The boy's active intolerance of the seemingly malicious injustices of fortune became the man's philosophical acceptance of the fact that such injustices are part of the scheme of human existence.

His years might still be a boy's, but in all else Harry Revell was full man.

For five days following the escape from the Indians the weather held good; though there was no diminution in the cold. This assisted to the making of a fair progress, the toil of trail-breaking being lessened. But it was through a poorly-timbered land; hot food was impossible; and there were times when the wretched substitute for a fire was insufficient for the brewing of tea. The nights were the worst; when both men went to sleep shivering, huddled together for the sake of the warmth of contact, and awoke—lucky were they if this did not happen before dawn—stiffened and numbed.

A change had taken place in Jesse Gardner. He no longer grumbled or made complaint; from him came no further protests of his

inability to go on ; indeed, it was seldom he spoke at all—never unless spoken to. He hauled on the sledge or walked behind with about as much liveliness as a mechanical figure. He appeared hopelessly broken-spirited.

Only there were times when Harry, suddenly glancing behind him, would find Gardner's eyes fixed upon him in a watchful, calculating stare that at once concerned itself elsewhere immediately the man saw himself noticed.

This fact made Harry thoughtful, and withheld him from the conclusion that the gold-seeker's mind was weakening. He was careful to keep the rifle always under his eyes, and, as a further precaution, unloaded it.

The precaution lost them the chance of fresh meat on the morning of the sixth day, when they entered upon a tract of frozen swamp land where thickets of black spruce, balsam, canoe birch, and here and there, in scattered patches, the tamarac flourished. The ground surface was firm though uneven, and Gardner, swinging round to the south-west of the woodland, was making good time. Suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks and shouted.

"Moose!" he exclaimed, pointing to where a big bull had trotted from out a thicket not a hundred yards ahead, and was standing on the firm snow, quietly surveying the men.

Possibly they were the first of the species the animal had seen in its life ; and, apparently devoid of all fear, it remained watching with intent curiosity while Harry tore the cover

from the Winchester and brought the weapon to his shoulder. Then he remembered there was no cartridge in the breech ; and while he was fumbling in his pocket, the moose turned about and disappeared among the timber.

Gardner said nothing ; but in his eyes was an expression more eloquent of his feelings than a volume of words.

That night there was fire enough to make the men feel warm for the first time for a week. There was a hot supper, with bannocks and tea ; but Gardner sat with a sullen, discontented look on his face, and, except for the purposes of swallowing, would not open his lips. When they rolled themselves in a blanket apiece, stretched on spruce boughs within a triangle of three fires, he suddenly looked Harry squarely in the eyes.

" Reckon yer fearin' I may shoot ye, hey ? " he drawled sneeringly.

There was no sun the following morning. The sky was the colour of snow and water, and a sharp wind blew ominously. Before an hour had passed, the promise was redeemed, and the two were trudging forward in the thick of a fierce snowstorm.

This kind of weather continued for several days, making existence a misery and destroying all hope of keeping to a settled line of direction.

To add to their troubles, Gardner had the ill luck to drop into the fire the remaining store of the small stock of tea. The other provisions, too, were getting dangerously low. Only three

days' supply of flour now remained to them. When Harry spoke of making content on a half ration, Gardner flew into a rage.

"Ain't content, hey, t' work me worse 'n a sledge dog," he broke out; "but now ye set yer mind on starvin' me."

"You're getting as much as I am, no more, no less," Harry retorted. "Maybe we'll happen on fresh meat."

"Yes, 'n' ye'll lose it same as ye did th' moose," sneered Gardner.

But Gardner needn't have worried. Not a head of game, not a sign of hide, fur or feather showed itself. Animal life appeared to have deserted the region.

The one set-off against the streak of ill luck that clung to them so persistently; the one consolation in those days of intolerable cold, of scanty food, of blind and bitter, seemingly purposeless toil; was that timber remained abundant.

At every camp they sat beside a roaring bonfire of spruce sticks, tamarac, or birch. During the plodding march, flogged by icy winds or half blinded by the whirling snow as they stumbled forward, little more than semi-conscious, there would come anticipation of the moment when they would listen to the snap and crackle of the blazing logs, watch the tongues of ruddy flame leap upward, and feel their chilled bodies loosen and expand as they absorbed the heat from the consuming timber.

With days of semi-starvation behind them ; with the sledge a useless encumbrance that Harry refused to relinquish although their food was reduced to no more than a single tin of meat and a bare half pannikin of flour ; with hunger gnawing at their vitals and despair awaiting the moment to seize their hearts, they struck a broad trail running westward.

Many sledges, dog-drawn, had passed along that trail, and it was of recent use. Without a word, Harry, who was ahead, turned into it. With quicker gait and firmer tread both men pushed on, so ready is hope to respond to the least encouragement.

For an hour—two—three hours—they held on. And then came along a snow-tempest that hid the trail, blurred the sight, forced the unhappy men to shelter, cowering in a drift while the flakes formed a thick pall over their lower extremities, and, when its fury was spent, showed a desert of spotless white, its smooth surface unmarked by the smallest blot or scratch.

Then it was that Jesse Gardner broke down. Cursing, he refused to move a further step. It was easier—a whole lot easier—to die there and then. By main force Harry dragged him to his feet, and, since he would make no movement of his own, lifted him on his back and carried him, dragging the sledge by a rope between his teeth.

That trip—it lasted no more than half a mile, and how he got over that he couldn't

have explained—cost Harry the little finger of his left hand. Frostbite seized it; and four days after, an Indian amputated it with his knife to save the entire hand.

By the bare tops of some half-buried shrubs Harry dropped his burden, dug down to the wood with his axe, and succeeded in kindling some kind of a fire. Then he fed Gardner the last remnant of their food.

The man's life was saved. And Harry, drawing in his belt, felt a grim satisfaction.

Had he not promised himself to take Jesse Gardner to Fort Selkirk?

The next day Gardner was able to walk; and with voice, foot, and fist Harry drove him forward. They had fire but no supper that night.

With three more holes taken in his belt, Harry set off next morning, the sun shining with a mocking brilliance. Gardner was on the sledge—tied there, wrapped in the two blankets. He had made a lunatic attempt to take Harry's pistol during the night and shoot him.

At intervals, to save him from freezing, Harry would untie him and force him to run with the sledge.

That afternoon they ran into a camp of Dog-Rib Indians who had wandered westward from their usual stamping grounds.

The Dog-Ribs bear no savoury reputation, but promise of substantial reward if they would provide food, dogs, and a guide to Fort Selkirk

was sufficient to gain their help and interest, even if the feelings of ordinary humanity had been absent—as some wandering white travellers have alleged against these Red men.

But the trip to Fort Selkirk would not be for several days, both Harry and his prisoner being in need of rest.

Harry went to sleep—after a frugal meal—and slept for twenty hours without opening his eyes.

When he awakened it was to find Jesse Gardner missing. By enquiries backed with threats, Harry learned that the American had set off twelve hours earlier with a sled and team of huskies, together with food, which, by some mysterious means, he had obtained from the Indians.

Now to the Red man a good dog-team is worth more than money. Perhaps that was why the Dog-Rib (no man would own to the transaction) had made the bargain. Anyway, obtaining the hire of the best team of the tribe, together with its owner's services, Harry set out to pursue the runaway.

All through the silent, starlit night they ran, following a clear trail, the inspection of which drew from the stolid Indian now and again a secret laugh as if he found something amusing, though he was deaf to Harry's questioning.

Three hours after dawn they came up with the fugitive. Gardner was furiously beating at the dogs with a club in vain endeavour to overcome their obstinate refusal to proceed



"GARDNER SUBMITTED QUIETLY, THROWING UP HIS HANDS."

further. Another animal, the leader of the team, lay on the snow, clubbed into insensibility. At this sight the laughter of the Red man with Harry went beyond the bounds of moderation.

Probably it was he had disposed of the team to the American, and therefore knew well enough the kind of team he had sold.

At Harry's summons to surrender, Gardner, a dazed look in his eyes, submitted quietly, throwing up his hands.

"I'm through," he said—nothing more.

Thereafter, he gave no further trouble.

Only once before Fort Selkirk was reached did he make any reference to what had gone before, since the day he had come up to Fort Scott to buy an auger, and then he put the question as though he had no direct interest in the answer.

"Say, mister; what d' ye reckon they'll do to me?" he asked.

"Can't say," Harry replied. "But you can be sure I shan't forget to make it clear that you were the means of saving my life."

A puzzled expression came into Gardner's eyes, but he said nothing.

At Fort Selkirk, Harry left prisoner and guide at the two-storied building which formed the store, and went direct to the "Big House" and asked for Mr. Fraser.

Fraser's manner clearly showed the surprise that the identity of his visitor caused him; his greeting was perfunctory.

"I didn't expect ye," he said bluntly.

"I daresay not, Mr. Fraser," Harry answered. "It wasn't here I expected to finish up when I started out; but in the circumstances I concluded it was the best thing to do to come right along here."

"Started out! But I don't understand. Did ye not get my message?"

"I received none."

Fraser frowned thoughtfully.

"I sent an Indian runner to ye—it'll be now two months back. Did he no arrive?"

"That I cannot say."

The frown grew more pronounced. "What have ye come up for?"

"To make a report. I——."

The trader's eyes opened. "To make a report!" he repeated slowly. "But why? What's wrong?"

"That's what I'm here to tell you."

"But why not send a messenger?"

"There was none to send. Besides, I believed myself the best messenger for the news I have to give."

"Ye came down the river? Did ye learn nothing of my runner?" asked Fraser. "It was important news. Ye were to hold on at the post until ye heard further. I told ye I was not returning, the man in charge here being ill, and me staying to keep his place. He has died since. The runner was a good, reliable man. How came ye to miss him?"

"Possibly, Mr. Fraser, because I was not at the fort," Harry answered quietly.

For a full minute the trader's blue eyes regarded his assistant sternly.

"Not at th' post?" he said slowly.

"No. It is about that——."

"Sit ye down, Mr. Revell," said Fraser. "Either my understanding's no very clear or we're at cross purposes. Sit ye down and tell me your meaning."

And Harry sat down and told him, as concisely as was consistent with clearness, of the arrival of the Klondike party, the trouble that had arisen with the Indians; of his own ride to warn the police, and what had befallen since.

Donald Fraser made a good listener. Never for an instant did his eyes leave Harry's face; never did he break in with an interruption, even to ask a question to clear up a doubtful point—tribute to the lucidity of Harry's relation of the story. His face expressed acute attention, but nothing beyond.

"And so ye've come along here, bringing this man Gardner with ye, to make your report," he observed when Harry had finished. "Ye've nothing to add?"

"No. I believe I have left out nothing."

"Very well. And now I recommend ye to get back to your post and your duty—to-morrow, if ye're in a fit state to travel," Fraser said. "The health of ye hasn't suffered?"

"I trust not, thank you."

"Then ye'll follow my recommendation, Mr. Revell;" and the trader rose from his chair.

"There's no better advice or order I can give ye. The Company expects its representatives to do their duty ; and a trader's duty is at the post to which he is assigned. Ye'll be having supper with me the night, of course."

It was not a lively meal. Fraser was hospitable without displaying warmth ; his manner and conversation were formal and commonplace. His conversation never went near the events that had occupied Harry for the past months. Nor did Harry himself make reference thereto.

If the young man was in any way hurt (and he would have been compelled to admit the charge), he permitted not the shadow of a sign of his feelings to become apparent. He, too, was formal, respectful, and attentive. He did not talk a great deal.

But before saying "Good-night" to Fraser he allowed himself a question.

"Mr. Fraser, there is something I want to put to you," he said. "When you left me in charge at Fort Scott, and these things of which I've told you came along, I used to say to myself, when uncertain how to act : 'What would Mr. Fraser do if he were here now ?' Now will you tell me whether, in your opinion, what I have done to meet the circumstances I found myself faced with, was right or wrong ?"

For more than a minute he waited for an answer, watching the trader's unrelaxed, composed face. Then——

"My opeenion, Mr. Revell, as to the right or wrong of the way ye have acted is neither

here nor there," Fraser replied deliberately. "The more so, because it will not be asked, and it'll do ye neither good nor harm. What is of consequence to ye is—What will the Company think? Good-night t' ye, Mr. Revell."

CHAPTER XXIV

WHAT THE COMPANY THOUGHT

It was well to be back again at the fort, with the company of old John, the steady recurrence of properly-cooked and unstinted meals, the warmth of the log-fed, red-hot stove, after such weeks as those Harry had lately lived through ; and the lad was wholly appreciative of the change from the toil, the hardships, and the hazards of the trail. He was glad of the chance to loaf around and take things easily if he so wished ; though this was seldom, and never when the clear sky and the pale sunshine tempted him out of doors—which was frequently ; for the sole encouragement the North West offers the inactive man is to freeze his extremities.

Harry, however, was not the first to find the keen edge of enjoyment of ease after toil speedily blunted. After a while, the well-ordered comfort of life at the post bred in him a weariness, an impatience that folks who have not so much as sipped of the cup of adventure or known the thrill and excitement of battling for very existence would deem ungrateful.

On the further side of fifty, Odysseus himself, back from his travels, is convinced of the superiority of a definite home, comfort, and certainty of the amenities of life to the wanderer's camp fire, unease, and doubt as to what the

next twenty-four hours may bring forth. But Odysseus on the hither side of twenty, having once tasted full and perfect freedom, is a very different person. For him there is but one camp "of proved desire and known delight." Any other is unsatisfying for long.

Harry Revell wasn't even able to put in his time worrying over the opinion (mighty doubtful, if a line were to be taken through Donald Fraser) his employers were going to form as to his conduct and conception of his duty to them. Sure, he wasn't exactly wanting to get fired. At twenty, to be fired is hurtful to one's pride, however carefully and fully one may prove that it is really of less than no consequence. For Harry, in some things, anyway, was a pig-headed young man, and he had satisfied himself that what he had done wasn't wrong. If the Company believed otherwise (as Fraser's manner had suggested) well, there must be agreement to differ.

There were other jobs going than serving the H. B. C.

He was very pleased, therefore, when the end of the third week after his return brought an interruption in the shape of a traveller, who desired to accept the hospitality of the post.

Harry was busy thawing out a half-dozen fish, frozen solid during the trip between the house and the river, where he had been fishing through a hole chopped in the ice, when the tinkle of bells coming close caught his ear.

As he stepped outside, the tinkling became

a violent jangle as a sled, drawn by three dogs, came to a standstill. The driver, a tall fellow in fur cap, long black sheep-skin coat and moccasins, after a "There, you beggars!" to the panting dogs, came towards him with the customary "Hello!"

"Hello! Glad to——," began Harry, when he was interrupted by a violent shout of laughter.

His hand was suddenly seized between the driver's mittens, his arm shaken with extraordinary violence.

"You're a liar; and you'll know it when you see who I am," announced a rich voice. "Glad to see me, are you? You wait until I'm out of this rig, and then I'll show you what a mistake you're making. But I'm glad to see *you*. Oh yes! You'll know all about it in a minute." And again there was an explosion of laughter.

"Who in thunder is it?" demanded Harry curiously, stepping closer and peering at as much of the face as the surround of fur rendered visible.

"Don't be in such an almighty hurry," the other advised, already engaged in loosing the dogs from their harness. "You'll know soon enough—too soon for your health. Well, I've met with a considerable variety of surprises during my six years in this blooming land of fancy religions and temperatures that 'd make old George W. appear a first-class liar, but I guess this is where I reach my limit.

Will someone kindly hand me the top biscuit off the prize pile."

"Is it a lunatic?" asked Harry, fairly puzzled.

The voice seemed familiar, but he could not place the speaker.

"Didn't know me, hey, in this fancy rig-out they've just supplied us with?" the fellow laughed, as they stepped into the house. "How about it now?"

He whipped off the fur cap, revealing the twinkling blue eyes, now dancing with pleasure, small spruce moustache, and square jaw belonging to Constable Ellis Ray of the North West Mounted Police.

"Gee!" exclaimed Harry; and he was overflowing with delight and surprise; for he had liked Ray and believed him dead. "This is great. Why, man, I'd thought you were dead—gone under in that awful blizzard."

"You'll be feeling mighty sorry that blizzard didn't kill you before I've finished with you," returned Ray, as again their hands met in a prolonged and bone-cracking grip. "Oh, I've been saving it up for you, my son; though I'd been thinking lately that it was only your ghost was going to be let in for it."

"And the sergeant—Norton?"

"O.K."

"Hooray! I want to see him——"

"You don't—not alive, anyway," corrected the policeman. "If you're alive after this—and it's sure doubtful—and Norton's around,

get busy and hide yourself. I told him you were a goner, but he wouldn't believe me. Says he still has hopes, and keeps a club always handy in case. You leave the sergeant alone, my friend. I'm a bit of a terror, but I'm a Dove of Peace compared with Norton."

"Come right in," Harry said heartily. "Hi, John; let's have some coffee along, and grub as soon as you can get it ready."

They went into the living room; outdoor garments were thrown off; and a couple of chairs dragged up to the stove so that the sitters' knees were within inches of the glowing metal; and Harry waited impatiently while the policeman swallowed scalding coffee as though the inside of his throat were boiler-plated.

"Now then," said Harry. "Go ahead and tell me where you've been, what you've been doing, and how you managed to escape that blizzard."

"Same way as you did, I guess," was the answer. "And don't you go patting yourself on the back, my son, for a marvellous escape. As I told you before, you haven't finished. You've got Norton and me to deal with yet."

Harry laughed. "You're mighty free with all your warnings and threats. What's the matter? What have I done?"

The constable let out a yell that would have made an Indian envious.

"Ye gods!" and he lifted his eyes to the roof. "What have I done, he says! What haven't you done, rather?"

"You'll get sane some time, I trust," Harry said hopefully. "Well, you escaped the blizzard all right. Where have you been since, old man?"

"Wandering around mostly in that charming place Dante talks of—where he shoves—Brutus, wasn't it?" replied Ray. "Oh, we've been having a peach of a time—joy to live for ever in one's memory, y' know."

"Out with it then. I'm wanting to know. Did you find anything of the Gardner——."

"Harry Revell, you'll stop right there," interrupted Ray warningly. "Don't mention that name again. I never want to hear it for so long as I live. Norton's sworn an oath to shoot on the mere sound of it. So take warning. I don't mind telling you what took place, but I'm not going to sit here and listen to you—no, not even in your own shack—mention that word while I'm able to pull trigger."

"Seem to have been impressed," ventured Harry.

"That's the word," said Ray grimly. "We were impressed. There're people who're going to be more than impressed—the Gardner outfit themselves to wit."

"Then you caught them?" asked Harry eagerly.

"I've been trying to tell you so for the last ten minutes, but you seem to want to do all the chinning yourself," retorted Ray. "Now keep your mouth shut—if possible—and I'll tell you all about the cruellest, wickedest, coldest job into which two poor innocent men—that's

Norton and me—were ever unjustifiably shoved. Salute, my son ;” and the third pint mug of red-hot coffee went its appointed way.

“ Now then,” began Ray, when he had got his pipe well alight. “ I’ll begin with your shameful desertion of us two poor innocents when that little blizzard stunt dropped on us. You hit the breeze like a Derby winner, and we never saw you more. Thought you were dead. Hoped so since—Norton has anyway. He’s an unforgiving beggar. Say, Revell, did you really know what kind of a job you were sending us on when you came in with your yarn ? ”

“ Judging from your highly-coloured preamble, it appears I didn’t,” grinned the listener.

“ You’ve the benefit of the doubt, prisoner. Well, Norton and I stuck together so far as we could see each other, and when we couldn’t see, we felt—tied the bronks’ bridles together, y’ know. That was lucky. Norton tried hard to lose himself and me, too, but I wasn’t having any. We were bundled along like a couple of straws for a while, and ultimately we bunched down behind a bit of a hillock. Stayed there all night. Oh it was fierce, as the natives say. Only Norton’s heated language saved us from being frozen solid. It was some time next morning before we discovered whether we were alive. How did you get on ? ”

“ Fell into a wood ; lighted a fire ; and went to sleep.”

Ray murmured something about “ the luck of the lunatic,” and proceeded.

"Well, we wandered around a bit after that, and then Norton said we might as well do the thing properly; so we hiked back to the post and scared up a sled. He said he reckoned we were going to have some snow."

"He wasn't wrong," Harry said feelingly.

"On our way back, we picked up a horse, that ugly-headed brute——"

Harry leaped from his chair.

"Skookum!" he shouted excitedly.

Ray nodded; and for the third time Harry gripped hands with him crushingly. This was good news indeed.

"By Jove, but I am glad to think that old rascal's alive," the lad cried fervently.

"Come over and fetch him one day," invited Ray. "It was finding the cayuse made us feel sure you were dead and so safe from our just vengeance. Where were you then?"

"Haven't a notion. I found myself by the Black river."

"We were there, too," said Ray. "Norton thought your American friends might be making for the south, and we hoped to cut them off. But when we hit a trail going north, we were fairly flabbergasted. Who'd want to go north in winter? For preference give me a nice, comfortable gaol."

"Did you follow that trail?" Harry wanted to know.

"Yes; tossed up for it, and Norton won. I was cocksure I was right that none but maniacs would ever travel north in winter, and I gathered

from you that Gardner & Co. were a fairly clear-headed crowd. Well, we followed that trail, though I knew it was only going to finish in running some red-skinned crowd to earth. And I was right," cried Ray triumphantly.

"Indians!"

Harry frowned. Surely this was the trail he had taken as Gardner's prisoner of which the constable was speaking.

"Norton was correct, too," went on Ray. "I must admit that. Those 'painted warriors of the plains' (only they weren't painted) put us on the track of your Klondikers, and, after a deuce of a lot of trouble, on account of the snow, that insisted upon covering up all tracks at most inconvenient times, with cold in plenty, grub short, frostbite, and most of the annoyances to which the human flesh is heir, mosquitos excepted, we at last collected your friends. They'll be at Athabasca Landing now, I guess, waiting to be taken down for trial when it's convenient. All but one, that is—the leader of the push. The others said he'd met with an accident in the snow—where they'd left him. Now what about yourself?"

"One minute," begged Harry, trying to keep his internal satisfaction from finding outward expression. "What about the Indians?"

"Just come in from the finding of part of 'em now," explained Ray. "I'm on my way to report their location among the Sand Hills, by the Nahanni river. Gave me an awful lot

of trouble. Seems that they got cold feet when they discovered you'd quitted your post. Guessed what you were after. So they divided. One lot crossed the river—that was the batch we found who put us on the Gardner trail ;—the other half went north on the west side. I managed to quieten them. Their two chiefs will be coming down as witnesses when the trial comes off."

"And where was it you came upon the first bunch?" asked Harry eagerly.

"Close by a biggish spruce wood, say two days' travel east of Trout Lake. Why?"

"And their chief: who is he?"

"Sour-looking brute. Looks and acts as if his food didn't agree with him," Ray answered. "When we sighted them, a bunch of the men streaked out for the north. Guilty conscience, I guess. But Norton rode after them, and I suppose he put the fear of the law into them. Anyhow, they gave up their intention and came back. Seemed rather relieved when the sergeant made them understand they were considered the victims; that it was your American friends we wanted to lay by the heels."

Harry gave his thigh a resounding slap.

"So that's the explanation!" he exclaimed. "I've wondered dozens of times what it was caused them to give up their attempt." He met Ray's puzzled stare with a smile. "Say, did Norton hear any shooting when he caught up these fugitives?"

"Yes, he said something about it. Why?"

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The Indians explained they'd stopped to try for some grub. "What d' you know about it?"

"Only that it was myself and Jesse Gardner they were shooting at and not rabbits," replied Harry. "To think of Norton——"

"You! What do you mean?" Ray demanded. "And Jesse Gardner! He's the fellow who died in the snow."

"Not recently," denied Harry. "You go up to Fort Selkirk, and you'll find Gardner there as large as life and as surly as a bear with a sore head."

And then he related his own story.

"Well," said Ray admiringly, when the tale was told; "if you'll tell that to Norton when you see him, maybe he'll forego the pleasure of swatting you with the club I told you he's been carrying around. For myself, I forgive you freely. But why, oh why, man;" his voice rose in an anguished wail. "Why ain't you in our little crowd? You're wasted, fairly wasted, on this pottering trading stunt. I don't want to bring blushes to your—ahem!—manly cheek, but you'd be a credit to us—yes, even to us."

"Thank you. If I get fired, old man, I'll think about it," Harry told him.

Constable Ellis Ray was so delighted with Harry's company (that was how he put it, anyway) that he cast all thoughts of duty to the four winds, and stayed over at Fort Scott for two days.

When the final handshake was given, Ray

pathetically begged him not to forget his promise.

"Anyhow," he concluded; "you'll ride over and let us know what happens. I'd give a month's pay to see you in the uniform."

"Compliment to me or the uniform?" laughed Harry. "But I'm coming all right. That's a bet. I'm wanting to get Skookum back again."

The day following Ellis Ray's departure arrived another dog-drawn sledge, with two men, one of whom returned Harry's "Hello, glad to see you" with a long, penetrating look, a faint smile, and a non-committal "Maybe ye are."

He was a short, squarely-built man of between fifty and sixty years of age, with pale blue eyes under bushy, prominent eyebrows, and a square, weather-beaten face ending in a clipped and pointed beard flaked with grey patches. In dress he differed little from his companion; but there was something in his manner, a terse, commanding manner of speaking, an air of dominance, from which Harry concluded him one well-used to the wielding of a wide and unquestioned authority.

He might have been an Indian agent, a District Commissioner perhaps. Harry did not know him from Adam. But in the North West you don't enquire of the stranger who comes to you for the hospitality of food and a night's lodging for his name and particulars of his profession and degree of consequence.

Such want of manners would receive no toleration whatever, or encouragement. If he chooses to volunteer the information, well and good.

"It's the makings of a hard winter, I'm afraid," Harry said affably to his guest, as they stood in front of the stove, the second man being engaged with the dog-team.

"I've known the Territory these thirty-eight years, and I can recall harder," was the direct answer. "More, there's no call for ye to be afraid, young man. Ye cannot control the frost an' the snow; but because ye cannot be master 'tis no reason for being a whimpering servant."

Harry glanced at him with no great favour. He was beginning to think he did not like this man, with his hard voice and ungenial manner.

"Ye'll be in charge of this post, maybe?" asked the middle-aged man after a comprehensive glance around the room which concluded with Harry.

"In charge, yes; assistant to the trader, who is temporarily engaged at another post," replied Harry shortly.

He was forming another opinion—that this man represented one of the rival fur-trading corporations whose competition even the powerful Company was being compelled to notice.

"Then ye'd like to show me around, maybe, seeing that I'm the Company's Chief Factor," was the next remark, made without the faintest alteration or inflexion in the direct, matter-of-fact voice. Then, without allowing Harry time

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to reply, he added: "But I'll not be asking ye. I've still two eyes to see for myself the things that are to be seen, and another man's introduction doesn't put another complexion on them. And the things that aren't wanted to be seen, well, it's better for the other man if he isn't around when they're discovered. Ye'll be giving me the storehouse key."

Harry handed over the big key without a word, and went to talk with the sledge driver, who was warming himself by the cooking fire. He was still talking with the man when the Chief Factor returned. He had been away perhaps ten minutes. Harry went back to the other room.

"Ye can say what stores the fort held when Mr. Fraser handed over to ye," began the Chief Factor as soon as Harry was well inside, as though time were a commodity so precious that not a single moment ought to be wasted.

"The books will show that, sir," Harry replied; and taking them from their cupboard, he displayed them on the table.

But the other did not look at them.

"The storehouse is all but empty," he continued.

"With care, what there is will last until the boats get up next spring."

With no prejudice in favour of his superior, Harry was certainly not exerting himself to scare up any exaggerated deference, the other's high position notwithstanding.

The Chief Factor nodded. • "Have little,

spend little," he commented. "How arises this shortness of the stores?" While speaking, he had taken a note-book from an inner pocket and opened it. "I see it is not usual for such great outgoings from this post as is declared by the difference between the quantity credited last July and that now remaining."

"It has gone to the Indians."

"Hum! I passed this morning by the place where the Indian village used to be. I saw no lodges there. Doubtless they are away on their trapping. Where is your credits book, young man?"

Harry passed the book over, and for some minutes the official scrutinised it.

"I see no credit here for several thousand pounds' weight of stores that you have apparently distributed," he observed.

"There is no credit, sir."

"Then will ye kindly tell me why, young man?" said the Chief Factor, without betraying the slightest sign of surprise or any other emotion.

"Will you sit down, sir?" returned Harry. "It is not a short story."

"I thank ye; but I have never yet heard the story worth my hearing that was too long for me to hear it standing," was the uncompromising rejoinder. "I am listening, young man."

There was a hint in this that Harry chose to take as disagreeable. Curtly, bluntly, in as few words as he could contrive, giving no explanations, making no excuses and urging no

justifications, he related the bare facts, just the actual happenings that had resulted in his leaving the post in the sole care of John McCraw.

"Then I rode to the Red Fort to acquaint the police with the trouble this Gardner outfit had raised with the Indians," he concluded.

"And ye held yourself justified, Mr. Revell, in leaving the Company's property unprotected, except for this one old half-breed, even as I suppose ye justified to yourself the disposing of the Company's stores in another way without payment for them or hope thereof?" suggested, rather than enquired, the Chief Factor, his hard face expressing nothing but close attention.

"After much thinking, sir, I concluded I was justified, and I acted on the conclusion."

"How old are ye?"

"Nineteen, sir."

"Over young, I misdoubt, to decide in a matter dealing wi' many thousands pounds' worth of property—and not your own at that," observed the Chief Factor.

For the first time the seriousness of ruffled temper left Harry's face. He smiled.

"Age, sir, is not anyone's fault, though it may be a misfortune," he said.

But the sally did not provoke the Factor to a smile.

"And the Police: did they arrest these men?"

"I heard yesterday from one of the police that the outfit, with one exception, had been at last arrested; they are now at Athabasca Landing."

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"Where were they taken?"

"In the Trout Lake region."

"And the Indians?"

"They, too, fled. The police have assured them they are in no danger, so now they will be returning."

"There is hope, then, that your transactions while in temporary charge of the post will not result in a great loss to the Company, over and above the second outfit of stores you gave to the Indians?"

"Yes, sir; there is hope."

"As for the stores?"

"I regard those as a premium paid to prevent an outbreak of murder and ravage the consequences of which I don't think anyone could fully foresee."

"It was then an insurance?"

"Yes."

"That the Company will be expected to pay for the security of the Territory against disorder, rebellion, and killing?"

"That is one way of putting it," admitted Harry after a brief hesitation.

"It is the way *you* put it, Mr. Revell; the loss being not yours but the Company's?" He waited. "Ye don't answer?"

"There is only one actual answer, sir, to your question, and you may not care to hear it," flashed Harry, his colour rising.

"On the contrary, young man; I am here to listen to whatever you have to say," the Factor returned composedly.

"Then my answer is that, as a servant of the Company, I believed that the Company was as greatly concerned in the peace and orderliness of the country as in selling stores. I believed that the Company stood as much for administration as for shopkeeping. Perhaps, sir, I was mistaken."

"Hm!" said the Factor, and he put away his notebook.

"This is where the police get a new recruit," Harry told himself.

"I came through Fort Selkirk on my way here," remarked the Factor. "I saw Mr. Fraser, and he told me that you did not return to your post after warning the police. That you went north with the Gardner outfit; and you found your way to Selkirk, bringing the leader of the outfit as a prisoner. Is this correct?"

"That is what I told Mr. Fraser, and it is correct," Harry replied stiffly.

"You have nothing to add?"

"No, sir."

"Then I'll not be staying longer, Mr. Revell."

"You'll stay the night, surely."

"Thank ye, but my time does not permit. But before I go, let me tell ye that I'm glad of the opportunity of hearing ye speak your mind, Mr. Revell. Too many men have none of their own to speak." For a moment it seemed to Harry that a flash of kindness and humour warmed the Factor's cold blue eyes, but his voice was as business-like, his manner as curt, as before as he continued: "Mr. Fraser

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will be remaining at Selkirk, and ye'll be staying here in charge for a time. I'll be sending ye an assistant in the spring, with the hope that ye'll make of him as good a servant of the Company as ye are yourself. Then, I believe I'll have room for ye elsewhere. There'll be trade opening in the Yukon if we can find the right men to handle it; men who, if I may use your own words, believe the Company stands for administration as well as for shop-keeping. Mr. Revell, I'm glad to have met ye. I shall meet ye again, I'm thinking."

And while Harry was yet wondering what it was he'd said or done to bring about a decision so overwhelmingly unexpected, or if it were that the great man had come to the post with his mind already made up, the Chief Factor gripped his unready hand and shook it warmly.

"So long!"

And with a brief nod, the Chief Factor was out of the room and calling to the dog-driver to have the team ready. The two men were already on the move by the time Harry had followed to the door.

"This'll be a disappointment for Ray," Harry told himself, as he stepped back into the house.

But there was pride and elation within himself, and he knew that they left no room for disappointment.

"And I never even said 'Thank you!'" he suddenly recollected; and for a moment he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself.

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Then as he returned the books to their cupboard the feeling left him.

"Believe he's the sort of man who wouldn't want me to say 'Thank you!' to him," he said aloud. "'He'll just expect I shall *do* it.'"

And Harry was right.

